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CECILIA DE NOËL

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BY

LANOE FALCONER

AUTHOR OF 'MADEMOISELLE IXE'

'Through such souls alone,
God, stooping, shows sufficient of His Light
For us i' the dark to rise by.'
The Ring and the Book.

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TO MY FRIEND

GERTRUDE IRELAND BLACKBURNE

I DEDICATE THE STUDY, WHICH OWES SO MUCH TO

HER SYMPATHY AND HELP.

LANOE FALCONER.

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CHAPTER I

ATHERLEY'S GOSPEL

'THERE is no revelation but that of science,' said Atherley.

It was after dinner in the drawing-room. From the cold of the early spring night, closed shutters and drawn curtains carefully protected us; shaded lamps and a wood fire diffused an exquisite twilight; we breathed a mild and even balmy atmosphere scented with hothouse flowers.

'And this revelation completely satisfies all reasonable desires,' he continued, surveying his small audience from the hearthrug where he stood; 'mind, I say all reasonable desires. If you have a healthy appetite for bread, you

will get it and plenty of it, but if you have a sickly craving for manna, why then you will come badly off, that is all. This is the gospel of fact, not of fancy: of things as they actually are, you know, instead of as A dreamt they were, or B decided they ought to be, or C would like to have them. So this gospel is apt to look a little dull beside the highly coloured romances the churches have accustomed us to—as a modern plate-glass window might, compared with a stained-glass oriel in a mediæval cathedral. There is no doubt which is the prettier of the two. The question is, do you want pretty colour or do you want clear daylight?'

He paused, but neither of his listeners spoke. Lady Atherley was counting the stitches of her knitting; I was too tired; so he resumed: 'For my part, I prefer the daylight and the glass, without any daubing. What does science discover in the universe? Precision, accuracy, reliability—any amount of it; but as to pity, mercy, love! The

fact is, that famous simile of the angel playing at chess was a mistake. Very smart, I grant you, but altogether misleading. Why! the orthodox quote it as much as the others—always a bad sign. It tickles these anthropomorphic fancies, which are at the bottom of all their creeds. Imagine yourself playing at chess, not with an angel, but with an automaton, an admirably constructed automaton whose mechanism can outwit your brains any day: calm and strong, if you like, but no more playing for love than the clock behind me is ticking for love; there you have a much clearer notion of existence. A much clearer notion, and a much more satisfactory notion too, I say. Fair play and no favour! What more can you ask, if you are fit to live?'

His kindling glance sought the farther end of the long drawing-room; had it fallen upon me instead, perhaps that last challenge might have been less assured; and yet how bravely it became the speaker, whose wide-browed head

a no less admirable frame supported. Even the stiff evening uniform of his class could not conceal the grace of form which health and activity had moulded, working through highly favoured generations. There was latent force implied in every line of it, and, in the steady poise of look and mien, that perfect nervous balance which is the crown of strength.

'And with our creed, of course, we shift our moral code as well. The ten commandments, or at least the second table, we retain for obvious reasons, but the theological virtues must be got rid of as quickly as possible. Charity, for instance, is a mischievous quality — it is too indulgent to weakness, which is not to be indulged or encouraged, but stamped out. Hope is another pernicious quality leading to all kinds of preposterous expectations which never are, or can be, fulfilled; and as to faith, it is simply a vice. So far from taking anything on trust, you must refuse to accept any statement whatsoever till it is proved so plainly you can't

help believing it whether you like it or not; just as a theorem in——'

'George,' said Lady Atherley, 'what is that noise?'

The question, timed as Lady Atherley's remarks so often were, came with something of a shock. Her husband, thus checked in full flight, seemed to reel for a moment, but quickly recovering himself, asked resignedly: 'What noise?'

'Such a strange noise like the howling of a dog.'

'Probably it is the howling of a dog.'

'No, for it came from inside the house, and Tip sleeps outside now, in the saddle-room, I believe. It sounded in the servants' wing. Did you hear it, Mr. Lyndsay?'

I confessed that I had not.

'Well, as I can offer no explanation,' said Atherley, 'perhaps I may be allowed to go on with what I was saying. Doubt, obstinate and almost invincible doubt, is the virtue we must now cultivate, just as——'

'Why, there it is again,' cried Lady Atherley.

Atherley instantly rang the bell near him, and while Lady Atherley continued to repeat that it was very strange, and that she could not imagine what it would be, he waited silently till his summons was answered by a footman.

'Charles, what is the meaning of that crying or howling which seems to come from your end of the house?'

'I think, Sir George,' said Charles, with the coldly impassive manner of a highly-trained servant—'I think, Sir George, it must be Ann the kitchen-maid that you hear.'

'Indeed! and may I ask what Ann the kitchen-maid is supposed to be doing?'

'If you please, Sir George, she is in hysterics.'

'Oh! why?' exclaimed Lady Atherley plaintively.

'Because, my lady, Mrs. Mallet has seen the ghost!'

'Because Mrs. Mallet has seen the ghost!'

repeated Atherley. 'Pray, what is Mrs. Mallet herself doing under the circumstances?'

'She is having some brandy-and-water, Sir George.'

'Mrs. Mallet is a sensible woman,' said Atherley heartily; 'Ann, the kitchen-maid, had better follow her example.'

'You may go, Charles,' said Lady Atherley; and as the door closed behind him, exclaimed, 'I wish that horrid woman had never entered the house!'

'What horrid woman? Your too sympathetic kitchen-maid?'

'No, that—that Mrs. Mallet.'

'Why are you angry with her? Because she has seen the ghost?'

'Yes, for I told her most particularly the very day I engaged her, after Mrs. Webb left us in that sudden way—I told her I never allowed the ghost to be mentioned.'

'And why, my dear, did you break your own excellent rule by mentioning it to her?'

'Because she had the impertinence to tell me, almost directly she came into the morning-

room, that she knew all about the ghost; but I stopped her at once, and said that if ever she spoke of such a thing, especially to the other servants, I should be very much displeased; and now she goes and behaves in this way.'

'Where did you pick up this viper?'

'She comes from Quarley Beacon. There was no one in this stupid village who could cook at all, and Cecilia de Noël, who recommended her——'

'Cecilia de Noël!' repeated Atherley, with that long-drawn emphasis which suggests so much. 'My dear Jane, I must say that in taking a servant on Cissy's recommendation you did not display your usual sound common sense. I should as soon have thought of asking her to buy me a gun, knowing that she would carefully pick out the one least likely to shoot anything. Cissy is accustomed to look upon a servant as something to be waited on and taken care of. Her own household, as we all know, is composed chiefly of chronic invalids.'

'But I explained to Cecilia that I wanted

somebody who was strong as well as a good cook; and I am sure there is nothing the matter with Mrs. Mallet. She is as fat as possible, and as red! Besides, she has never been one of Cecilia's servants; she only goes there to help sometimes; and she says she is perfectly respectable.'

'Mrs. Mallet says that Cissy is perfectly respectable?'

'No, George; it is not likely that I should allow a person in Mrs. Mallet's position to speak disrespectfully to me about Cecilia. Cecilia said Mrs. Mallet was perfectly respectable.'

'I should not think dear old Ciss exactly knew the meaning of the word.'

'Cecilia may be peculiar in many ways, but she is too much of a lady to send me any one who was not quite nice. I don't believe there is anything against Mrs. Mallet's character. She cooks very well, you must allow that; you said only two days ago you never had tasted an omelette so nicely made in England.'

'Did she cook that omelette? Then I am sure she is perfectly respectable; and pray let

her see as many ghosts as she cares to, especially if it leads to nothing worse than her taking a moderate quantity of brandy. Time to smoke, Lindy. I am off.'

I dragged myself up after my usual fashion, and was preparing to follow him when Lady Atherley, directly he was gone, began :

'It is such a pity that clever people can never see things as others do. George always goes on in this way as if the ghost were of no consequence, but I always knew how it would be. Of course it is nice that George should come in for the place, as he might not have done if his uncle had married, and people said it would be delightful to live in such an old house, but there are a good many drawbacks, I can assure you. Sir Marmaduke lived abroad for years before he died, and everything has got into such a state. We have had to nearly refurnish the house; the bedrooms are not done yet. The servants' accommodation is very bad too, and there was no proper cooking-range in the kitchen. But

the worst of all is the ghost. Directly I heard of it I knew we should have trouble with the servants; and we had not been here a month when our cook, who had lived with us for years, gave warning because the place was damp. At first she said it was the ghost, but when I told her not to talk such nonsense she said it was the damp. And then it is so awkward about visitors. What are we to do when the fishing season begins? I cannot get George to understand that some people have a great objection to anything of the kind, and are quite angry if you put them into a haunted room. And it is much worse than having only one haunted room, because we could make that into a bachelor's bedroom—I don't think they mind; or a linen cupboard as they do at Wimbourne Castle; but this ghost seems to appear in all the rooms, and even in the halls and passages, so I cannot think what we are to do.'

I said it was extraordinary, and I meant it. That a ghost should venture into Atherley's neighbourhood was less amazing than that it

should continue to exist in his wife's presence, so much more fatal than his eloquence to all but the tangible and the solid. Her orthodoxy is above suspicion, but after some hours of her society I am unable to contemplate any aspects of life save the comfortable and the uncomfortable: while the Universe itself appears to me only a gigantic apparatus especially designed to provide Lady Atherley and her class with cans of hot water at stated intervals, costly repasts elaborately served, and all other requisites of irreproachable civilisation.

But before I had time to say more, Atherley in his smoking-coat looked in to see if I was coming or not.

'Don't keep Mr. Lyndsay up late, George,' said my kind hostess; 'he looks so tired.'

'You look dead beat,' he said later on, in his own particular and untidy den, as he carefully stuffed the bowl of his pipe. 'I think it would go better with you, old chap, if you did not hold yourself in quite so tight. I don't want you to rave or commit suicide in

some untidy fashion, as the hero of a French novel does; but you are as well-behaved as a woman, without a woman's grand resources of hysterics and general unreasonableness all round. You always were a little too good for human nature's daily food. Your notions on some points are quite unwholesomely superfine. It would be a comfort to see you let out in some way. I wish you would have a real good fling for once.'

'I should have to pay too dear for it afterwards. My superfine habits are not a matter of choice only, you must remember.'

'Oh! —— the women! Not the best of them is worth bothering about, let alone a shameless jilt.'

'You were always hard upon her, George. She jilted a cripple for a very fine specimen of the race. Some of your favourite physiologists would say she was quite right.'

'You never understood her, Lindy. It was not a case of jilting a cripple at all. She jilted three thousand a year and a small place for ten thousand a year and a big one.'

After all, it did hurt a little, which Atherley must have divined, for crossing the room on some pretext or another he let his strong hand rest, just for an instant, gently upon my shoulder, thus, after the manner of his race, mutely and concisely expressing affection and sympathy that might have swelled a canto.

'I shall be sorry,' he said presently, lying rather than sitting in the deep chair beside the fire, 'very sorry, if the ghost is going to make itself a nuisance.'

'What is the story of the ghost?'

'Story! God bless you, it has none to tell, sir; at least it never has told it, and no one else rightly knows it. It—I mean the ghost—is older than the family. We found it here when we came into the place about two hundred years ago, and it refused to be dislodged. It is rather uncertain in its habits. Sometimes it is not heard of for years; then all at once it reappears, generally, I may observe, when some imaginative female in the house is in love, or out of spirits, or bored in

any other way. She sees it, and then of course —the complaint being highly infectious—so do a lot more. One of the family started the theory it was the ghost of the portrait, or rather the unknown individual whose portrait hangs high up over the sideboard in the dining-room.'

'You don't mean the lady in green velvet with the snuff-box?'

'Certainly not; that is my own great-grand-aunt. I mean a square of black canvas with one round yellow spot in the middle and a dirty white smudge under the spot. There are members of this family—Aunt Eleanour, for instance—who tell me the yellow spot is a man's face and the dirty white smudge an Elizabethan ruff. Then there is a picture of a man in armour in the oak room, which I don't believe is a portrait at all; but Aunt Henrietta swears it is, and of the ghost too—as he was before he died, of course. And very interesting details both my aunts are ready to furnish concerning the two originals. It is extraordinary what an amount of information is

always forthcoming about things of which nobody can know anything—as about the next world, for instance. The last time I went to church the preacher gave as minute an account of what our post-mortem experiences were to be as if he had gone through it all himself several times.'

'Well, does the ghost usually appear in a ruff or in armour?'

'It depends entirely upon who sees it—a ghost always does. Last night, for instance, I lay you odds it wore neither ruff nor armour, because Mrs. Mallet is not likely to have heard of either the one or the other. Not that she saw the ghost—not she. What she saw was a bogie, not a ghost.'

'Why, what is the difference?'

'Immense! As big as that which separates the objective from the subjective. Any one can see a bogie. It is a real thing belonging to the external world. It may be a bright light, a white sheet, or a black shadow—always at night, you know, or at least in the dusk,

when you are apt to be a little mixed in your observations. The best example of a bogie was Sir Walter Scott's. It looked—in the twilight, remember—exactly like Lord Byron, who had not long departed this life at the time Sir Walter saw it. Nine men out of ten would have gone off and sworn they had seen a ghost; why, religions have been founded on just such stuff: but Sir Walter, as sane a man as ever lived—though he did write poetry—kept his head clear and went up closer to his ghost, which proved on examination to be a waterproof.'

'A waterproof?'

'Or a railway rug—I forget which: the moral is the same.'

'Well, what is a ghost?'

'A ghost is nothing—an airy nothing manufactured by your own disordered senses or your own over-excited brain.'

'I beg to observe that I never saw a ghost in my life.'

'I am glad to hear it. It does you credit.

If ever any one had an excuse for seeing a ghost it would be a man whose spine was jarred. But I meant nothing personal by the pronoun—only to give greater force to my remarks. The first person singular will do instead. The ghost belongs to the same lot as the faces that make mouths at me when I have brain-fever, the reptiles that crawl about when I have an attack of the D.T., or —to take a more familiar example—the spots I see floating before my eyes when my liver is out of order. You will allow there is nothing supernatural in all that?'

'Certainly. Though, did not that pretty niece of Mrs. Molyneux's say she used to see those spots floating before her eyes when a misfortune was impending?'

'I fancy she did, and true enough too, as such spots would very likely precede a bilious attack, which is misfortune enough while it lasts. But still, even Mrs. Molyneux's niece, even Mrs. Molyneux herself, would not say the fever faces, or the reptiles, or the spots, were

supernatural. And in fact the ghost is, so far, more—more *recherché*, let us say, than the other things. It takes more than a bilious attack or a fever, or even D.T., to produce a ghost. It takes nothing less than a pretty high degree of nervous sensibility and excitable imagination. Now these two disorders have not been much developed yet by the masses, in spite of the school-boards: ergo, any apparition which leads to hysterics or brandy-and-water in the servants' hall is a bogie, not a ghost.'

He knocked the ashes out of his pipe, and added:

'And now, Lindy, as we don't want another ghost haunting the house, I will conduct you to by-by.'

It was a strange house, Weald Manor, designed, one might suppose, by some inveterate enemy of light. It lay at the foot of a steep hill which screened it from the morning sun, and the few windows which looked towards the rising day were so shaped as to admit but

little of its brightness. At night it was even worse, at least in the halls and passages, for there, owing probably to the dark oak which lined both walls and floor, a generous supply of lamps did little more than illumine the surface of the darkness, leaving unfathomed and unexplained mysterious shadows that brooded in distant corners, or, towering giant-wise to the ceiling, loomed ominously overhead. Will-o'-the-wisp-like reflections from our lighted candles danced in the polished surface of panel and balustrade, as from the hall we went upstairs, I helping myself from step to step by Atherley's arm, as instinctively, as unconsciously almost, as he offered it. We stopped on the first landing. Before us rose the stairs leading to the gallery where Atherley's bedroom was; to our left ran 'the bachelor's passage,' where I was lodged.

'Night, night,' were Atherley's parting words. 'Don't dream of flirts or ghosts, but sleep sound.'

Sleep sound! the kind words sounded like

mockery. Sleep to me, always chary of her presence, was at best but a fair-weather friend, instantly deserting me when pain or exhaustion made me crave the more for rest and forgetfulness; but I had something to do in the interim—a little *auto-da-fé* to perform, by which, with that faith in ceremonial, so deep laid in human nature, I meant once for all to lay the ghost that haunted me—the ghost of a delightful but irrevocable past, with which I had dallied too long.

Sitting before the wood-fire I slowly unfolded them: the three faintly-perfumed sheets with the gilt monogram above the pointed writing.

'Dear Mr. Lyndsay,' ran the first, 'why did you not come over to-day? I was expecting you to appear all the afternoon.—Yours sincerely, G. E. L.'

The second was dated four weeks later—

'You silly boy! I forbid you ever to write or talk of yourself in such a way again. You are not a cripple; and if you had ever had a

mother or a sister, you would know how little women think of such things. How many more assurances do you expect from me? Do you wish me to propose to you again? No, if you won't have me, go.—Yours in spite of yourself, GLADYS.'

The third—the third is too long to quote entire; besides, the substance is contained in this last sentence—

'So I think, my dear Mr. Lyndsay, for your sake more than my own, our engagement had better be broken off.'

In this letter, dated six weeks ago, she had charged me to burn all that she had written to me, and as yet I had not done so, shrinking from the sharp unreasonable pain with which we bury the beloved dead. But the time of my mourning was accomplished. I tore the paper into fragments and dropped them into the flames.

It must have been the pang with which I watched them darken and shrivel that brought back the memory of another sharp

stab. It was that day ten years ago, when I walked for the first time after my accident. Supported by a stick on one side, and by Atherley on the other, I crawled down the long gallery at home and halted before a high wide-open window to see the sunlit view of park and woods and distant downland. Then all at once, ridden by my groom, Charming went past with feet that verily danced upon the greensward, and quivering nostrils that rapturously inhaled the breath of spring and of morning. I said: 'George, I want *you* to have Charming.' And it made me smile, even in that bitter moment, to remember how indistinctly, how churlishly almost, Atherley accepted the gift in his eager haste to get me out of sight and thought of it.

It was long before the last fluttering rags had vanished, transmuted into fiery dust. The clock on the landing had many times chanted its dirge since I had heard below the footsteps of the servants carrying away the lamps from the sitting-rooms and the hall.

Later still came the far-off sound of Atherley's door closing behind him, like the final good-night of the waking day. Over all the unconscious household had stolen that silence which is more than silence, that hush which seems to wait for something, that stillness of the night-watch which is kept alone. It was familiar enough to me, but to-night it had a new meaning; like the sunlight that shines when we are happy, or the rain that falls when we are weeping, it seemed, as if in sympathy, to be repeating and accenting what I could not so vividly have told in words. In my life, and for the second time, there was the same desolate pause, as if the dreary tale were finished and only the drearier epilogue remained to live through—the same sense of sad separation from the happy and the healthful.

I made a great effort to read, holding the book before me and compelling myself to follow the sentences, but that power of abstraction which can conquer pain does not belong to temperaments like mine. If only I could have

slept, as men have been able to do even upon the rack; but every hour that passed left me more awake, more alive, more super-sensitive to suffering.

Early in the morning, long before the dawn, I must have been feverish, I think. My head and hands burned, the air of the room stifled me, I was losing my self-control.

I opened the window and leant out. The cool air revived me bodily, but to the fever of the spirit it brought no relief. To my heart, if not to my lips, sprang the old old cry for help which anguish has wrung from generation after generation. The agony of mine, I felt wildly, must pierce through sense, time, space, everything—even to the Living Heart of all and bring thence some token of pity! For one instant my passion seemed to beat against the silent heavens, then to fall back bruised and bleeding.

Out of the darkness came not so much as a wind whisper or the twinkle of a star.

Was Atherley right after all?

CHAPTER II

THE STRANGER'S GOSPEL

From the short unsatisfying slumber which sometimes follows a night of insomnia I was awakened by the laughter and shouts of children. When I looked out I saw brooding above the hollow a still gray day, in whose light the woodlands of the park were all in sombre brown, and the trout stream between its sedgy banks glided dark and lustreless.

On the lawn, still wet with dew, and crossed by the shadows of the bare elms, Atherley's little sons, Harold and Denis, were playing with a very unlovely but much-beloved mongrel called Tip. They had bought him with their own pocket-money from a tinker who was ill-using him, and then claimed for him the hos-

pitality of their parents; so, though Atherley often spoke of the dog as a disgrace to the household, he remained a member thereof, and received from a family incapable of being uncivil, far less unkind, to an animal, as much attention as if he had been high-bred and beautiful—which indeed he plainly supposed himself to be.

When, about an hour later, after their daily custom, this almost inseparable trio fell into the breakfast-room as if the door had suddenly given way before them, the boys were able to revenge themselves for the rebuke this entrance provoked by the tidings they brought with them.

'I say, old Mallet is going,' cried Harold cheerfully, as he wriggled himself on to his chair. 'Denis, mind I want some of that egg-stuff.'

'Take your arms off the table, Harold,' said Lady Atherley. 'Pray, how do you know Mrs. Mallet is going?'

'She said so herself. She said,' he went

on, screwing up his nose and speaking in a falsetto to express the intensity of his scorn—'she said she was afraid of the ghost.'

'I told you I did not allow that word to be mentioned.'

'I did not; it was old Mallet.'

'But, pray, what were you doing in old Mallet's domain?' asked Atherley.

'Cooking cabbage for Tip.'

'Hum! What with ghosts by night and boys by day, our cook seems to have a pleasant time of it! I shall be glad when Miss Jones's holidays are over. Castleman, is it true that Mrs. Mallet talks of leaving us because of the ghost?'

'I am sure I don't know, Sir George,' answered the old butler. 'She was going on about it very foolish this morning.'

'And how is the kitchen-maid?'

'Has not come down yet, Sir George; says her nerve is shook,' said Castleman, retiring with a plate to the sideboard; then added, with the freedom of an old servant, 'Bile, *I* should say.'

'Probably. We had better send for Doctor What's-his-name.'

'The usual doctor is away,' said Lady Atherley. 'There is a London doctor in his place. He is clever, Lady Silvia said, but he gives himself airs.'

'Never mind what he gives himself if he gives his patients the right thing.'

'And after all we can manage very well without Ann, but what are we to do about Mrs. Mallet? I always told you how it would be.'

'But, my dear, it is not my fault. You look as reproachfully at me as if it were my ghost which was causing all this disturbance instead of the ghost of a remote ancestor—predecessor, in fact.'

'No, but you will always talk just as if it was of no consequence.'

'I don't talk of the cook's going as being of no consequence. Far from it. But you must not let her go, that is all.'

'How can I prevent her going? I think you had better talk to her yourself.'

'I should like to meet her very much; would not you, Lindy? I should like to hear her story; it must be a blood-curdling one, to judge from its effect upon Ann. The only person I have yet met who pretended to have seen the ghost was Aunt Eleanour.'

'And what was it like, daddy?' asked Denis, much interested.

'She did not say, Den. She would never tell me anything about it.'

'Would she tell me?'

'I am afraid not. I don't think she would tell any one, except perhaps Mr. Lyndsay. He has a way of worming things out of people.'

'Mr. Lyndsay, how do you worm things out of people?'

'I don't know, Denis; you must ask your father.'

'First, by never asking any questions,' said Atherley promptly; 'and then by a curious way he has of looking as if he was listening attentively to what was said to him, instead

of thinking, as most people do, what he shall say himself when he gets a chance of putting a word in.'

'But how could Aunt Eleanour see the ghost when there is not any such thing?' cried Harold.

'How indeed!' said his father, rising; 'that is just the puzzle. It will take you years to find it out. Lindy, look into the morning-room in about half an hour, and you will hear a tale whose lightest word will harrow up thy soul, etc. etc.'

As Lady Atherley kindly seconded this invitation I accepted it, though not with the consequences predicted. Anything less suggestive of the supernatural, or in every way less like the typical ghost-seer, was surely never produced than the round and rubicund little person I found in conversation with the Atherleys. Mrs. Mallet was a brunette who might once have considered herself a beauty, to judge by the self-conscious and self-satisfied simper which the ghastliest recollections were

unable to banish. As I entered I caught only the last words of Atherley's speech—

'———treating you well, Mrs. Mallet?'

'Oh no, Sir George,' answered Mrs. Mallet, standing very straight and stiff, with two plump red hands folded demurely before her; 'which I have not a word to say against any one, but have met, ever since I come here, with the greatest of kindness and respect. But the noises, sir, the noises of a night is more than I can abear.'

'Oh, they are only rats, Mrs. Mallet.'

'No rats in this world ever made sech a noise, Sir George; which the very first night as I slep here, there come the most mysterioustest sounds as ever I hear, which I says to Hann, "Whatever are you a-doing?" which she woke up all of a suddent, as young people will, and said she never hear nor yet see nothing.'

'What was the noise like, Mrs. Mallet?'

'Well, Sir George, I can only compare it to the dragging of heavy furniture, which I really thought at first it was her ladyship a-coming

upstairs to waken me, took bad with burglars or a fire.'

'But, Mrs. Mallet, I am sure you are too brave a woman to mind a little noise.'

'It is not only noises, Sir George. Last night——'

Mrs. Mallet drew a long breath and closed her eyes.

'Yes, Mrs. Mallet, pray go on; I am very curious to hear what did happen last night.'

'It makes the cold chills run over me to think of it. We was all gone to bed—leastways the maids and me, and Hann and me was but just got to my room when says she to me, "Oh la! whatever do you think?" says she; "I promised Ellen when she went out this afternoon as I would shut the windows in the pink bedroom at four o'clock, and never come to think of it till this minute," she says. "Oh dear," I says, "and them new chintzes will be entirely ruined with the damp. Why, what a good-for-nothing girl you are!" I says; "and what you thinks on half your time is more

than I can tell." "Whatever shall I do?" she says, "for go along there at this time of night all by myself I dare not," says she. "Well," I says, "rather than you should go alone, I'll go along with you," I says, "for stay here by myself I would not," I says, "not if any one was to pay me hundreds." So we went down our stairs and along our passage to the door which you go into the gallery, Hann a-clutching hold of me and starting, which when we come into the gallery I was all of a tremble, and she shook so I said, "La! Hann, for goodness' sake do carry that candle straight, or you will grease the carpet shameful"; and come to the pink room I says, "Open the door." "La!" says she, "what if we was to see the ghost?" "Hold your silly nonsense this minute," I says, "and open the door," which she do, but stand right back for to let me go first, when, true as ever I am standing here, my lady, I see something white go by like a flash, and struck me cold in the face, and blew the candle out, and then come

the fearfullest noise, which thunderclaps is nothing to it. Hann began a-screaming, and we ran as fast as ever we could till we come to the pantry, where Mr. Castleman and the footman was. I thought I should ha' died: died I thought I should. My face was as white as that antimacassar.'

'How could you see your face, Mrs. Mallet?' somewhat peevishly objected Lady Atherley.

But Mrs. Mallet with great dignity retorted—

'Which I looked down my nose, and it were like a corpse's.'

'Very alarming,' said Atherley, 'but easily explained. Directly you opened the door there was, of course, a draught from the open window. That draught blew the candle out and knocked something over, probably a screen.'

'La' bless you, Sir George, it was more like paving-stones than screens a-falling.'

And indeed Mrs. Mallet was so far right,

that, when to settle the weighty question once for all, we adjourned in a body to the pink bedroom, we discovered that nothing less than the ceiling, or at least a portion of it, had fallen, and was lying in a heap of broken plaster upon the floor. However, the moral, as Atherley hastened to observe, was the same.

'You see, Mrs. Mallet, this was what made the noise.'

Mrs. Mallet made no reply, but it was evident she neither saw nor intended to see anything of the kind; and Atherley wisely substituted bribery for reasoning. But even with this he made little way till accidentally he mentioned the name of Mrs. de Noël, when, as if it had been a name to conjure by, Mrs. Mallet showed signs of softening.

'Yes, think of Mrs. de Noël, Mrs. Mallet; what will she say if you leave her cousin to starve?'

'I should not wish such a thing to happen for a moment,' said Mrs. Mallet, as if this

had been no figure of speech but the actual alternative, 'not to any relation of Mrs. de Noël.'

And shortly after the debate ended with a cheerful 'Well, Mrs. Mallet, you will give us another trial,' from Atherley.

'There,' he exclaimed, as we all three returned to the morning-room—'there is as splendid an example of the manufacture of a bogie as you are ever likely to meet with. All the spiritual phenomena are produced much in the same way. Work yourself up into a great state of terror and excitement, in the first place; in the next, procure one companion, if not more, as credulous and excitable as yourself; go at a late hour and with a dim light to a place where you have been told you will see something supernatural; steadfastly and determinedly look out for it, and—you will have your reward. These are precisely the lines on which a spiritual séance is conducted, only instead of plaster, which is not always so obliging as to fall in the nick of

time, you have a paid medium who supplies the material for your fancy to work upon. Mrs. Mallet, you see, has discovered all this for herself—that woman is a born genius. Just think what she might have been and seen if she had lived in a sphere where neither cooking nor any other rational occupation interfered with her pursuit of the supernatural. Mrs. Molyneux would be nowhere beside her.'

'I suppose she really does intend to stay,' said Lady Atherley.

'Of course she does. I always told you my powers of persuasion were irresistible.'

'But how annoying about the ceiling,' said Lady Atherley. 'Over the new carpet too! What can make the plaster fall in this way?'

'It is the quality of the climate,' said Atherley. 'It is horribly destructive. If you would read the batch of letters now on my writing-table from tenant-farmers you would see what I mean: barns, roofs, gates, everything is falling to pieces and must immediately be repaired—at the landlord's expense, of course.'

'We must send for a plasterer,' said Lady Atherley, 'and then the doctor. Perhaps you would have time to go round his way, George.'

'No, I have no time to go anywhere but to Northside Farm. Hunt has been waiting nearly half an hour for me as it is. Lindy, would you like to come with me?'

'No, thank you, George; I too am a landowner, and I mean to look over my audit accounts to-day.'

'Don't compare yourself to a poor overworked underpaid landowner like me. You are one of the landlords they spout about in the London parks on Sundays. You have nothing to do but sign receipts for your rents, paid in full and up to date.'

'Mr. Lyndsay is an excellent landlord,' said Lady Atherley; 'and they tell me the new church and the schools he has built are charming.'

'Very mischievous things both,' said Atherley. 'Ta-ta.'

That afternoon, Atherley being still absent, and Lady Atherley having gone forth to pay a round of calls, the little boys undertook my entertainment. They were in rather a sober mood for them, having just forfeited four weeks' pocket-money towards expenses incurred by Tip in the dairy, where they had foolishly allowed him to enter; so they accepted very good-humouredly my objections to wading in the river or climbing trees, and took me instead for a walk to Beggar's Stile. We climbed up the steep carriage-drive to the lodge, passed through the big iron gates, turned sharply to the left, and went down the road which the park palings border and the elms behind them shade, past the little copse beyond the park, till we came to a tumble-down gate with a stile beside it in the hedgerow; and this was Beggar's Stile. It was just on the brow of the little hill which sloped gradually downward to the village beneath, and commanded a wide view of the broad shallow valley and of the rising ground beyond.

I was glad to sit down on the step of the stile.

'Are you tired already, Mr. Lyndsay?' inquired Harold incredulously.

'Yes, a little.'

'I s'pose you are tired because you always have to pull your leg after you,' said Denis, turning upon me two large topaz-coloured eyes. 'Does it hurt you, Mr. Lyndsay?'

'Mother told you not to talk about Mr. Lyndsay's leg,' observed Harold sharply.

'No, she didn't; she said I was not to talk about the funny way he walked. She said——'

'Well, never mind, little man,' I interrupted. 'Is that Weald down there?'

'Yes,' cried Denis, maintaining his balance on the topmost bar but one of the gate with enviable ease. 'All these cottages and houses belong to Weald, and it is all daddy's on this side of the river down to where you see the white railings a long way down near the poplars, and that is the road we go to tea with

Aunt Eleanour; and do you see a little blue speck on the hill over there? You could see if you had a tefelscope. Daddy showed me once; but you must shut your eye. That is Quarley Beacon, where Aunt Cissy lives.'

'No, she does not, stupid,' cried Harold, now suspended, head downwards, by one foot from the topmost rail of the gate. 'No one lives there. She lives in Quarley Manor, just behind.'

Denis replied indirectly to the discourteous tone of this speech by trying with the point of his own foot to dislodge that by which Harold maintained his remarkable position, and a scuffle ensued, wherein, though a non-combatant, I seemed likely to get the worst, when their attention was fortunately diverted by the sight of Tip sneaking off, and evidently with the vilest motives, towards the covert.

My memory was haunted that day by certain words spoken seven months ago by Atherley, and by me at the time very ungraciously received:

'Remember, if you do come a cropper, it will go hard with you, old man; you can't shoot or hunt or fish off the blues, like other men.'

No, nor could I work them off, as some might have done. I possessed no distinct talents, no marked vocation. If there was nothing behind and beyond all this, what an empty freak of destiny my life would have been—full, not even of sound and fury, but of dull commonplace suffering: a tale told by an idiot with a spice of malice in him.

Then the view before me made itself felt, as a gentle persistent sound might have done: a flat, almost featureless scene—a little village church with cottages and gardens clustering about it, straggling away from it, by copses and meadows in which winter had left only the tenderest shades of the saddest colours. The winding river brightened the dull picture with broken glints of silver, and the tawny hues of the foreground faded through soft gradations of violet and azure into a far dis-

tance of pearly gray. It is not the scenery men cross continents and oceans to admire, and yet it has a message of its own. I felt it that day when I was heart-weary, and was glad that in one corner of this restless world the little hills preach peace.

Meantime Tip had been recaptured, and when he, or rather the ground close beside him, had been beaten severely with sticks, and he himself upbraided in terms which left the censors hoarse, we went down again into the hollow. Then Lady Atherley returned and gave me tea; and afterwards, in the library, I worked at accounts till it was nearly too dark to write. No doubt on the high ground the sky was aflame with brilliant colour, of which only a dim reflection tinged the dreary view of sward and leafless trees, to which, for some mysterious reason, a gig crawling down the carriage-drive gave the last touch of desolation.

Just as I laid my pen aside the door opened, and Castleman introduced a stranger.

'If you will wait here, sir, I will find her ladyship.'

The new-comer was young and slight, with an erect carriage and a firm step. He had the finely-cut features and dull colouring which I associate with the high-pressure life of a busy town, so that I guessed who he was before his first words told me.

'No, thank you, I will not sit down; I expect to be called to my patient immediately.'

The thought of this said patient made me smile, and in explanation I told him from what she was supposed to be suffering.

'Well; it is less common than other forms of feverishness, but will probably yield to the same remedies,' was his only comment.

'You do not believe in ghosts?'

'Pardon me, I do, just as I believe in all symptoms. When my patient tells me he hears bells ringing in his ear, or feels the ground swaying under his feet, I believe him implicitly, though I know nothing of the kind is actually taking place. The ghost, so

far, belongs to the same class as the other experiences, that it is a symptom—it may be of a very trifling, it may be of a very serious disorder.'

The voice, the keen flash of the eye, impressed me. I recognised one of those alert intelligences, beside whose vivid flame the mental life of most men seems to smoulder. I wished to hear him speak again.

'Is this your view of all supernatural manifestations?'

'Of all so-called supernatural manifestations; I don't understand the word or the distinction. No event which has actually taken place can be supernatural. Since it belongs to the actual it must be governed by, it must be the outcome of, laws which everywhere govern the actual—everywhere and at all times. In fact, it must be natural, whatever we may think of it.'

'Then if a miracle could be proven, it would be no miracle to you?'

'Certainly not.'

'And it could convince you of nothing?'

'Neither me nor any one else who has outgrown his childhood, I should think. I have never been able to understand the outcry of the orthodox over their lost miracles. It makes their position neither better nor worse. The miracles could never prove their creeds. How am I to recognise a divine messenger? He makes the furniture float about the room; he changes that coal into gold; he projects himself or his image here when he is a thousand miles away. Why, an emissary from the devil might do as much! It only proves—always supposing he really does these things instead of merely appearing to do so—it proves that he is better acquainted with natural laws than I am. What if he could kill me by an effort of the will? What if he could bring me to life again? It is always the same; he might still be morally my inferior; he might be a false prophet after all.'

He took out his watch and looked at it, by this simple action illustrating and remind-

ing me of the difference between us—he talking to pass away the time, I thinking aloud the gnawing question at my heart.

'And you have no hope for anything beyond this?'

Something in my voice must have struck his ear, trained like every other organ of observation to quick and fine perception, for he looked at me more attentively, and it was in a gentler tone that he said—

'Surely, you do not mean for a life beyond this? One's best hope must be that the whole miserable business ends with death.'

'Have you found life so wretched?'

'I am not speaking from my own particular point of view. I am singularly, exceptionally, fortunate. I am healthy; I have tastes which I can gratify, work which I keenly enjoy. Whether the tastes are worth gratifying or the work worth doing, I cannot say. At least they act as an anodyne to self-consciousness; they help me to forget the farce in which I play my part. Like Solomon, and all who

have had the best of life, I call it vanity. What do you suppose it is to those—by far the largest number, remember—who have had the worst of it? To them it is not vanity, it is misery.'

'But they suffer under the invariable laws you speak of—laws working towards deliverance and happiness in the future.'

'The future? Yes, I know that form of consolation which seems to satisfy so many. To me it seems a hollow one. I have never yet been able to understand how any amount of ecstasy enjoyed by B a million years hence can make up for the torture A is suffering to-day. I suppose, dealing so much with individuals as I do, I am inclined to individualise like a woman. I think of units rather than of the mass. At this moment I have before me a patient now left suffering pain as acute as any the rack ever inflicted. How does it affect his case that centuries later such pain may be unknown?'

'Of course, the individual's one and only

hope is a future existence. Then it may be all made up to him.'

'I see no reason to hope so. Either there is no God, and we shall still be at the mercy of the blind destiny we suffer under here; or there is a God, the God who looks on at this world and makes no sign! The sooner we escape from Him by annihilation the better.'

'Christians would tell you He had given a sign.'

'Yes; so they do in words and deny it in deeds. Nothing is sadder in the whole tragedy, or comedy, than these pitiable efforts to hide the truth, to gloss it over with fables which nobody in his heart of hearts believes —at least in these days. Why not face the worst like men? If we can't help being unhappy, we can help being dishonest and cowardly. Existence is a misfortune. Let us frankly confess that it is, and make the best of it.'

He was not looking at his watch now; he was pacing the room. At last, he was in

earnest, and had forgotten all accidents of time and place before the same enigma which perplexed myself.

'The best of it!' I re-echoed. 'Surely, under these circumstances, the best thing would be to commit suicide?'

'No,' he cried, stopping and turning sharply upon me. 'The worst, because the most cowardly; so long as you have strength, brains, money—anything with which you can do good.'

He looked past me through the window into the outer air, no longer faintly tinged, but dyed deep red by the light of the unseen but resplendent sunset, and added slowly, dejectedly, as if speaking to himself as much as to me—

'Yes, there is one thing worth living for—to help to make it all a little more bearable for the others.'

And then, all at once, his face, so virile yet so delicate, so young and yet so sad, reminded me of one I had seen in an old picture—the face

of an angel watching beside the dead Christ; and I cried—

'But are you certain He has made no sign; not hundreds of years ago, but in your own lifetime? not to saint or apostle, but to you, yourself? Has nothing which has happened to you, nothing you have ever seen or read or heard, tempted you to hope in something better?'

'Yes,' he said deliberately; 'I have had my weak moments. My conviction has wavered, not before religious teaching of any kind, however, nor before Nature, in which some people seem to find such promise; but I have met one or two women, and one man—all of them unknown, unremarkable people — whom the world never heard of, nor is likely to hear of, living uneventful obscure lives in out-of-the-way corners. For instance, there is a lady in this very neighbourhood, a relation of Sir George Atherley, I believe, Mrs. de No——'

'Her ladyship would like to see you in the

drawing-room, sir,' said Castleman, suddenly coming in.

The doctor bowed to me and immediately left the room.

CHAPTER III

MRS. MOSTYN'S GOSPEL

'No, they have not seen any more ghosts, sir,' replied Castleman scornfully next day, 'and never need have seen any. It is all along of this tea-drinking. We did not have this bother when the women took their beer regular. These teetotallers have done a lot of harm. They ought to be put down by Act of Parliament.'

And the kitchen-maid was better. Mrs. Mallet, indeed, assured Lady Atherley that Hann was not long for this world, having turned just the same colour as the late Mr. Mallet did on the eve of his death; but fortunately the patient herself, as well as the doctor, took a more hopeful view of the case.

'I can see Mrs. Mallet is a horrible old croaker,' said Lady Atherley.

'Let her croak,' said Atherley, 'so long as she cooks as she did last night. That curry would have got her absolution for anything if your uncle had been here.'

'That reminds me, George, the ceiling of the spare room is not mended yet.'

'Why, I thought you sent to Whitford for a plasterer yesterday?'

'Yes, and he came; but Mrs. Mallet has some extraordinary story about his falling into his bucket and spoiling his Sunday coat, and going home at once to change it. I can't make it out, but nothing is done to the ceiling.'

'I make it out,' said Atherley; 'I make out that he was a little the worse for drink. Have we not a plasterer in the village?'

'I think there is one. I fancy the Jacksons did not wish us to employ him, because he is a dissenter; but after all, giving him work is not the same as giving him presents.'

'No, indeed; nor do I see why, because he is a dissenter, I, who am only an infidel, am to put up with a hole in my ceiling.'

'Only, I don't know what his name is.'

'His name is Smart. Everybody in our village is called Smart—most inappropriately too.'

'No, George, the man the doctor told us about who is so dangerously ill is called Monk.'

'I am glad to hear it; but he doesn't belong to our parish, though he lives so close. He is actually in Rood Warren. His cottage is at the other side of the Common.'

'Then we can leave the wine and things as we go. And, George, while the boys are having tea with Aunt Eleanour, I think I shall drive on to Quarley Beacon and try and persuade Cecilia to come back and spend the night with us. I think we could manage to put her up in the little blue dressing-room. She is so good-natured; she won't mind its being so small.'

'Yes, do; I want Lyndsay to see her. And give my best love to Aunt Eleanour, and say that if she is going to send me any more tracts against Popery, I should be extremely obliged if she would prepay the postage sufficiently.'

'Oh no, George, I could not. It was only threepence.'

'Well, then, tell her it is no good sending any at all, because I have made up my mind to go over to Rome next July.'

'No, George; she might not like it, and I don't believe you are going to do anything of the kind. Oh, are you off already? I thought you would settle something about the plasterer.'

'No, no; I can't think of plasterers and repairs to-day. Even the galley-slave has his holiday—this is mine. I am going to see the hounds throw off at Rood Acre, and forget for one day that I have an inch of landed property in the world.'

'But, George, if the pink-room ceiling

is not put right by Saturday, where shall we put Uncle Augustus?'

'Into the room just opposite to Lindy's.'

'What! that little room? In the bachelor's passage? A man of his age, and of his position!'

'I am sure it is large enough for any one under a bishop. Besides, I don't think he is fussy about anything except his dinner.'

'It is not the way he is accustomed to be treated when he is on a visit, I can assure you. He is a person who is generally considered a great deal.'

'Well, I consider him a great deal. I consider him one of the finest old heathen I ever knew.'

Fortunately for their domestic peace, Lady Atherley usually misses the points of her husband's speeches, but there are some which jar upon her sense of the becoming, and this was one of them.

'I don't think,' she observed to me, the offender himself having escaped, 'that even

if Uncle Augustus were not my uncle, a heathen is a proper name to call a clergyman, especially a canon—and one who is so looked up to in the Church. Have you ever heard him preach? But you must have heard about him, and about his sermons? I thought so. They are beautiful. When he preaches the church is crammed, and with the best people—in the season, when they are in town. And he has written a great many religious books too — sermons and hymns and manuals. There is a little book in red morocco you may have seen in my sitting-room—I know it was there a week ago—which he gave me, *The Life of Prayer*, with a short meditation and a hymn for every hour of the day — all composed by him. We don't see so much of him as I could wish. He is so grieved about George's views. He gave him some of his own sermons, but of course George would not look at them; and—so annoying—the last time he came I put the sermons, two

beautiful large volumes of them, on the drawing-room table, and when we were all there after dinner George asked me quite loud what these smart books were, and where they came from? So altogether he has not come to see us for a long time; but as he happened to be staying with the Mountshires, I begged him to come over for a night or two; so you will hear him preach on Sunday.'

At lunch that day Lady Atherley proposed that I should accompany them to Woodcote. 'Do come, Mr. Lyndsay,' said Denis. 'We shall have cakes for tea, and jam-sandwiches as well.'

'And there is an awfully jolly banister for sliding down,' added Harold, 'without any turns or landing, you know.'

I professed myself unable to resist such inducements. Indeed, I was almost glad to go. The recollection of Mrs. Mostyn's cheerful face was as alluring to me that day as the thought of a glowing hearth might be to the beggar on the door-step. Here,

at least, was one to whom life was a blessing; who partook of all it could bestow with an appetite as healthfully keen as her nephew's, but without his disinclination or disregard for anything besides.

The mild March day felt milder, the rooks cawed more cheerfully, and the spring flowers shone out more fearlessly around us when we had passed through the white gates of Woodcote—a favoured spot gently declining to the sunniest quarter, and sheltered from the north and north-east by barricades of elm-woods. The tiny domain was exquisitely ordered, as I love to see everything which appertains to woman; and within the low white house, furnished after the simple and stiff fashion of a past generation, reigned the same dainty neatness, the same sunny cheerfulness, the native atmosphere of its chatelaine Mrs. Mostyn—a white-haired old lady long past seventy, with the bloom of youth on her cheek, its vivacity in her step, and its sparkle in her eyes.

Hardly were the first greetings exchanged when the children opened the ball of conversation by inquiring eagerly when tea would be ready.

'How can you be so greedy?' said their mother. 'Why, you have only just finished your dinner.'

'We dined at half-past one, and it is nearly half-past three.'

'Poor darlings!' cried Mrs. Mostyn, regarding them with the enraptured gaze of the true child-lover; 'their drive has made them hungry; and we cannot have tea very well before half-past four, because some old women from the village have come up to have tea, and the servants are busy attending to them. But I can tell you what you could do, dears. You know the way to the dairy; one of the maids is sure to be there; tell her to give you some cream. You will like that, won't you? Yes, you can go out by this door.'

'And remember to——'

Lady Atherley's exhortation remained un-

finished, her sons having darted through the door-window like arrows from the bow.

'Since Miss Jones has been gone for her holiday the children are quite unmanageable,' she observed.

'Oh, it is such a good sign!' cried Mrs. Mostyn heartily; 'it shows they are so thoroughly well. Mr. Lyndsay, why have you chosen that uncomfortable chair? Come and sit over beside me, if you are not afraid of the fire. And now, Jane, my love, tell me how you are getting on at Weald?'

Then followed a long catalogue of accidents and disappointments, of faithlessness and incapacity, to which Mrs. Mostyn supplied a running commentary of interjections sympathetic and consoling. There were, moreover, many changes for the worse since Sir Marmaduke had resided there: the shooting and the fishing had been alike neglected; the farmers were impoverished; the old places had changed hands.

'And a good many quite new people have

come to live in small houses round Weald,' said Lady Atherley. 'They have left cards on us. Do you know what they are like?'

'Quite ladies and gentlemen, I believe, and nice enough as long as you don't get to know them too intimately; but they are always quarrelling.'

'About what?'

'About everything; but especially about church matters—decorations and anthems and other rubbish. What they want is less of the church and more of the Bible.'

'I believe Mr. Jackson has a Bible-class every week.'

'But is it a Bible-class, or is it only called so? There is Mr. Austyn at Rood Warren, a Romanist in disguise if ever there was one: he is by way of having a Bible-class, and one of our farmers' daughters attended it. "And what part of the Bible are you studying now?" I asked her. "We are studying early church history." "I don't know any such chapter in the Bible as that," I said, and yet

I know my Bible pretty well. She explained it was a continuation of the Acts of the Apostles. I said: "My dear child, don't you be misled by any jugglery of that kind; there is no continuation of the Bible; and as to what people call the early church, its doings and sayings are of no consequence at all. The one question we have to ask ourselves is this: 'What does the Book say?' What is in the Book is God's word: what is not in the Book is only man's."'

The effect of this exposition on Lady Atherley was to make her ask eagerly whether the curate in charge at Rood Warren was one of the Austyns of Temple Leigh.

'I believe he is a nephew,' Mrs. Mostyn admitted, quite gloomily for her. 'It is painful to see people of good standing going astray in this manner.'

'I was thinking it would be so convenient to get a young man over to dinner sometimes; and Rood Warren cannot be very far from us, for one of Mr. Austyn's parishioners lives just at the end of Weald.'

'If you take my advice, my dearest Jane, you will not have anything to do with him. He is certain to be attractive—men of that sort always are; and there is no saying what he might do: perhaps gain an influence over George himself.'

'I don't think there need be any fear of that, for at dinner, you know, we need not have any religious discussions; I never will have them; they are almost as bad as politics, they make people so cross.'

Then she rose and explained her visit to Mrs. de Noël.

'But, Mr. Lyndsay,' said Mrs. Mostyn, 'are you going to desert the old woman for the young one, or are you going to stay and see my gardens and have tea? That is right. Good-bye, my dearest Jane. Give my dear love to Cissy, and tell her to come over and see me—but I shall have a glimpse of her on your way back.'

'I hope Mrs. de Noël may be persuaded to come back,' I said, as the carriage drove off,

and we walked along a gravel path by lawns of velvet smoothness; 'I would so much like to meet her.'

'Have you never met her? Dear Cecilia! She is a sweet creature—the sweetest, I think, I ever met, though perhaps I ought not to say so of my own niece. She wants but one thing—the grace of God.'

We passed into a little wood, tapestried with ivy, carpeted with clustering primroses, and she continued—

'It is most mysterious. Both Cecilia and George, being left orphans so early, were brought up by my dear sister Henrietta. She was a believing Christian, and no children ever had greater religious advantages than these two. As soon as they could speak they learnt hymns or texts of Scripture, and before they could read they knew whole chapters of the Bible by heart. George even now, I will say that for him, knows his Bible better than a good many clergymen. And the Sabbath, too. They were taught to

reverence the Lord's day in a way children never are nowadays. All games and picture-books put away on Saturday night; regularly to church morning and afternoon, and in the evening Henrietta would talk to them and question them about the sermon. And after all, here is George who says he believes in nothing; and as to Cecilia, I never can make out what she does or does not believe. However, I am quite happy in my mind about them. I feel they are of the elect. I am as certain of their salvation as I am of my own.'

A sudden scampering of feet upon the gravel was followed by the appearance of the boys, rosy with exercise and excitement.

'Well, my darling boys, have you had your cream?'

'Oh yes, Aunt Eleanour,' cried Harold, 'and we have been into the farm-yard and seen the little pigs. Such jolly little beasts, Mr. Lyndsay, and squeak so funnily when you pull their tails.'

'Oh, but I can't have my pigs unkindly treated.'

'Not unkindly, auntie,' cried Denis, swinging affectionately upon my arm; 'we only just tried to make their tails go straight, you know. And, Mr. Lyndsay, there is such a dear little baby calf.'

'But I want to give apples to the horses,' cried Harold.

So we went to the fruit-house for apples, which Mrs. Mostyn herself selected from an upper shelf, mounting a ladder with equal agility and grace; then to the stables, where these dainties were crunched by two very fat carriage-horses; then to the miniature farm-yard, and the tiny ivy-covered dairy beyond; and just as I was beginning to feel the first qualms of my besetting humiliation, fatigue, Mrs. Mostyn led us round to the garden—a garden with high red walls, and a dial in the meeting-place of the flower-bordered paths; and we sat down in a rustic seat cosily fitted into one sunny corner, just behind a great bed of hyacinths in flower.

The children had but one regret: Tip had been left behind.

'But mamma would not let us bring him,' cried Harold in an aggrieved tone, 'because he will roll in the flower-beds.'

'Do you think it is nearly half-past four, Aunt Eleanour?' asked Denis.

'Very nearly, I should think. Suppose you were to go and see if they have brought the tea-kettle in; and if they have, call to me from the drawing-room window, and I will come.'

The tempered sunlight fell full upon the delicate hyacinth clusters—coral, snow-white, and faintest lilac—exhaling their exquisite odour, and the warm sweet air seemed to enwrap us tenderly. My spirits, heavy as lead, began to rise—strangely, irrationally. Sunlight has always for me a supersensuous beauty, while the colour and perfume of flowers move me as sound vibrations move the musician. Just then it was to me as if through Nature, from that which is behind Nature, there reached me a pitying, a comforting caress.

And in the same key were Mrs. Mostyn's words when she next spoke.

'Mr. Lyndsay, I am an old woman and you are very young, and my heart goes out to all young creatures in sorrow, especially to one who has no mother of his own, no, nor father even, to comfort him. I know what trouble you have had. Would you be offended if I said how deeply I felt for you?'

'Offended, Mrs. Mostyn!'

'No. I see you understand me; you will not think me obtrusive when I say that I pray this great trial may be for your lasting good; may lead you to seek and to find salvation. The truth is brought home to us in many different ways, by many different instruments. My own eyes were opened by very extraordinary means.'

She was silent for a few instants, and then went on—

'When I was young, Mr. Lyndsay, I lived for the world only. I went to church, of course, like other people, and said my prayers

and called myself a Christian, but I did not know what the word meant. My sister Henrietta would often talk seriously to me, but it had no effect, and she was quite grieved over my hardened state; but my dear mother, a true saint, used to tell her to have no fear, that some day I should be sharply awakened to my soul's danger. But it was not till years after she was in heaven that her words came true.'

I looked at her and waited.

'We were still living at Weald Manor with my brother Marmaduke, and we had young people staying with us. They were all going—all but myself—to a ball at Carchester. I stayed at home because I had a slight cold, which made me feel tired and feverish, and disinclined to be dancing till early next morning. I went to bed early, and when I had sent away my maid I sat beside the fire for a little, thinking. You know the long gallery?'

'Yes.'

'My room was there; so I was quite alone,

for the servants slept, just as they do now, in the opposite end of the house. But I had my dog with me, such a dear little thing, a black-and-tan terrier. He was lying asleep on the rug beside me. Well, all at once he got up and put his head on one side as if he heard something, and he began barking. I only said, "Nonsense, Totty, lie down," and paid no more attention to him, till some moments afterwards he made a strange kind of noise as if he were trying to bark and was choked in some way. This made me look at him, and then I observed that he was trembling from head to foot, and staring in the strangest way at something behind me. I will honestly tell you he made me feel so uncomfortable I was frightened to look round; and still it was almost as bad to sit there and not look round; so at last I summoned up courage and turned my head. Then I saw it.'

'The ghost?'

'Yes.'

'What was it like?'

'It was like a shadow, only darker, and not lying against the wall as a shadow would do, but standing out from it in the air. It stood a little way from me in a corner of the room. It was in the shape of a man, with a ruff round his neck, and sleeves puffed out at the shoulders, as you often see in old pictures; but I don't remember much about that, for at the time I could think of nothing but the face.'

'And that——?'

'That was simply dreadful. I can't tell you what it was like. I could not have imagined it if I had not seen it. It was the look—the look in its eyes. After all these years it makes me tremble when I think of it. But what I felt was not the same nervous feeling which made me afraid to turn round. It went much deeper—indeed it went deeper than anything in my life had ever gone before; it went right down to my soul, in fact, and made me feel I had a soul.'

She had turned quite pale.

'Yes, Mr. Lyndsay, strange as it sounds,

the mere sight of that face made me realise in an instant what I had read and heard thousands of times, and what my mother and Henrietta had told me over and over again about the utter nothingness of earthly aims and comforts—of what in an ordinary way is called life. I had heard very fine sermons preached about the same thing: "What is our life, it is even a vapour," and the "vain shadow" in which we walk. Have you ever thought how we can go on hearing and even repeating true and wise words without getting at their real sense, and, what is worse, without suspecting our own ignorance?'

'I know it well.'

'When Henrietta used to say that the whirl of worldly occupations and interests and amusements in which I was so engrossed did not deserve to be called life, and could never satisfy the eternal soul within me, it used to seem to me an exaggerated way of saying that the next world would be better than this one; but I saw the meaning of her

words, I saw the truth of them, as I see these flowers before me, and feel the gravel under my feet: it came to me in a moment, the night these terrible eyes looked into mine. The feeling did not last, but I have never forgotten it, and never shall. It was as if a veil were lifted for an instant, and I was standing outside of my life and looking back at it; and it seemed so poor and worthless and unreal—I can't explain myself properly.'

'And did the figure remain for any time?'

'I do not know. I think I must have fainted. They found me lying in a half-unconscious state in my chair when they came home. I was ill in bed for weeks with what the doctors call low fever. But neither the fever nor anything else could remove the impression that had been made. That terrible thing was a blessed messenger to me. My real conversion was not till years later, but the way was prepared by the great shock I then received, and which roused me to a sense of my danger.'

'What do you think the thing you saw was, Mrs. Mostyn?'

'The ghost?'

'Yes.'

Slowly, thoughtfully, she answered me—

'I am certain it was a lost soul: nothing else could have worn that dreadful look.'

She paused for a few moments and then continued—

'Perhaps you are one of those who do not believe in the punishment of sin?'

'Who can disbelieve it, Mrs. Mostyn? Call it what we like, it is a fact. It confronts us on every side. We might as well refuse to believe in death.'

'It is not that I meant! I was talking of punishment in the next world, Mr. Lyndsay.'

'Well, there, too, no doubt it must continue, until the uttermost farthing is paid. I believe —at least I hope—that.'

She shook her head with a troubled expression.

'There is no paying that debt in the next

world. It can only be paid here. Here, a free pardon is offered to us, and if we do not accept it, then——' It is the fashion, even among believers, nowadays to avoid this awful subject. Preachers of the Gospel do not speak of it in the pulpit as they once did. It is considered too shocking for our modern notions. I have no patience with such weakness, such folly—worse than folly. It seems to me even more wrong to try and hide this terrible danger from ourselves and from others than to deny it altogether, as some poor deluded souls do. Mr. Lyndsay, have you ever realised what the place of torment will be like?'

'Yes; once, Mrs. Mostyn.'

'You were in pain?'

'I suppose it was pain,' I said.

For always, when anything revives this recollection, seared into my memory, the question rises: was it merely pain, physical pain, of which we all speak so easily and lightly? It lasted only ten minutes; ten minutes by the clock, that is. For me time

was annihilated. There was no past or future, but only an intolerable present, in which mind and soul were blotted out, and all of sentient existence that remained was the animal consciousness of agony. I cannot share men's stoical contempt for a Gehenna which is nothing worse.

'Mr. Lyndsay, imagine pain, worse than any ever endured on earth going on and on, for ever!'

A bird, not a thrush, but one of the minor singers, lighting on a bough near us, trilled one simple but ecstatic phrase.

'Do you really and truly believe, Mrs. Mostyn, that this will be the fate of any single being?'

'Of any single being? Do we not know that it is what will happen to the greatest number. For what does the Book say? "Many are called but few are chosen."'

Through the still, mild air, across the sun-steeped gardens, came the voices of the children—

'Aunt Eleanour! Aunt Eleanour!'

'Many are called,' she repeated, 'but few are chosen; and those who are not chosen shall be cast into everlasting fire.'

There was a pause. She turned to look at me, and, as if struck by something in my face, said gently, soothingly:

'Yes, it is a terrible thought, but only for the unregenerate. It has no terror for me. I trust it need have no terror for you. After all, how simple, how easy is the way of escape! You have only to believe.'

'And then?'

'And then you are safe, safe for evermore. Think of that. The foolish people who wish to explain away eternal punishment, forget that at the same time they explain away eternal happiness! You will be safe now, and after death you will be in heaven for evermore.'

'I shall be in heaven for evermore, and always there will be hell.'

'Yes.'

'Where the others will be?'

'What others? Only the wicked!'

'Aunt Eleanour! Aunt Eleanour!' called the children once more.

'I must go to them! But, Mr. Lyndsay, think over what I have said.'

And I remained and obeyed her, and beheld, entire, distinct, the spectre that drives men to madness or despair—illimitable omnipotent Malice. In its shadow the colour of the flowers was quenched, and the music of the birds rang false. Yet it wore the consecration of time and authority! What if it were true?

'Mr. Lyndsay,' said Denis at my elbow, 'Aunt Eleanour has sent me to fetch you to tea. Mr. Lyndsay, do you hear? Why do you look so strange?'

He caught my hand anxiously as he spoke, and by that little human touch the spell was broken. The phantom vanished; and, looking into the child's eyes, I felt it was a lie.

CHAPTER IV

CANON VERNADE'S GOSPEL

THERE was no Mrs. de Noël in the carriage when it returned; she had gone to London to stay with Mrs. Donnithorne, whom Atherley spoke of as Aunt Henrietta, and was not expected home till Wednesday.

'I am sorry,' Lady Atherley observed, as we drove home through the dusk; 'I should like to have had her here when Uncle Augustus was with us. I would have asked Mrs. Mostyn to dine with us, but I am not sure she and Uncle Augustus would get on. When her sister, Mrs. Donnithorne, met Uncle Augustus and his wife at lunch at our house once, she said she thought no minister of the Gospel ought to allow his child to take part

in worldly amusements or ceremonials. It was very awkward, because Uncle Augustus's eldest girl had been presented only the day before. And Aunt Clara, Uncle Augustus's wife, you know, who is rather quick, said it depended whether the minister of the Gospel was a gentleman or a shoe-black, because Mrs. Donnithorne was attending a dissenting chapel then where the preacher was quite a common uneducated sort of person. And after that they would not talk to each other, and altogether, I remember, it was very unpleasant. I do think it is such a pity,' cried Lady Atherley with real feeling, 'when people will take up these extreme religious views as all the Atherleys do. I am sure it is quite a comfort to have some one like you in the house, Mr. Lyndsay, who is not particular about religion.'

. . . . .

'If this is the best Aunt Eleanour has to show in the way of a ghost, she does well to keep so quiet about it,' was Atherley's

comment on that part of the story which, by special permission, I repeated to him next day. 'I never heard a weaker ghost story. She explains the whole thing away as she tells it. She was, as she candidly admits, ill and feverish—sickening for a fever, in fact, when the most rational person's senses are apt to play them strange tricks. She is alone at the dead of night in a house she believes to be haunted; and then her dog—an odious little beast, I remember him well, always barking at something or nothing;—the dog suggests there is somebody near. She looks round into a dark part of the room, and naturally, inevitably—all things considered—sees a ghost. Did you say it wore a ruff and puffed sleeves?'

'So Mrs. Mostyn said.'

'Of course, because, as I told you, Aunt Eleanour believed in the Elizabethan portrait theory. If it had been Aunt Henrietta, the ghost would have been in armour. Ghosts and all visitors from the other world obligingly

correspond with the preconceived notions of the visionary. When a white robe and a halo were considered the proper celestial outfit, saints and angels always appeared with white robes and halos. In the same way, the African savage, who believes in a god with a crooked leg, always sees him in dreams, waking or asleep, with a crooked leg; and——'

Here we were interrupted by a great stir in the hall outside, and Lady Atherley looked in to explain that the carriage with Uncle Augustus was just coming down the drive.

Her manner reminded me of the full importance of this arrival, as well as of the unfortunate circumstance that, owing to the ill-timed absence of the dissenting plasterer, the Canon must be lodged in the little room opposite to my own.

However, when I went into the drawing-room, I found him accepting his niece's apologies and explanations with great good-humour. To me also he was especially gracious.

'I had the pleasure of dining at Lindesford, Mr. Lyndsay, when you must have been in long clothes. I remember we had some of the finest trout I ever tasted. Are they still as good in your river?'

His voice, like himself, was massive and impressive; his bearing and manner inspired me with wistful admiration: what must life be to a man so self-confident, and so rightly self-confident?

'Is not Uncle Augustus a fine-looking man?' asked Lady Atherley, when he had left the room with Atherley. 'I cannot think why they do not make him a bishop; he would look so well in the robes. He ought to have had something when the last ministry was in, for Aunt Clara and Lord Lingford are cousins; but, unfortunately, the families were on bad terms because of a lawsuit.'

The morning after was bright and fair, so that sunlight mingled with the drowsy calm—Sunday in the country as we remember it, looking lovingly back from lands that are not

English to the tenderer side of the Puritan Sabbath. But I missed my little *aubade* from the lawn, and not till breakfast-time did I behold my small friends, who then came into the breakfast-room, one on either side of their mother—two miniature sailors, exquisitely neat but visibly dejected. Behind walked Tip, demurely recognising the change in the atmosphere, but, undisturbed thereby, he at once, with his usual air of self-satisfied dignity, assumed his place in the largest arm-chair.

'The landau could take us all to church except you, George,' said Lady Atherley, looking thoughtfully into the fire as we waited for breakfast and the Canon. 'But I suppose you would prefer to walk?'

'Why should you suppose I am going to church, either walking or driving?'

'Well, I certainly hoped you would have gone to-day; as Uncle Augustus is going to preach it seems only polite to do so.'

'Well, I don't mind; I daresay it will do me no harm; and if it is understood I attend

only out of consideration for my wife's uncle, then——'

He was interrupted by the entrance of the person in question.

Many times during breakfast Denis looked thoughtfully at his great-uncle, and at last inquired—

'Do you preach very long sermons, Uncle Augustus?'

'They are not generally considered so,' replied the Canon with some dignity.

'Denis, I have often told you not to ask questions,' said Lady Atherley.

'When I am grown up,' remarked Harold, 'I will be an atheist.'

'Do you know what an atheist is?' inquired his father.

'Yes, it is people who never go to church.'

'But they go to lecture-room, which you would find worse.'

'But they don't have sermons.'

'Don't they? Hours long, especially when they bury each other.'

'Oh!' said Harold, evidently taken aback, and somewhat reconciled to the church.

'When I am grown up,' said Denis, 'I mean to be the same church as Aunt Cissy.'

'And what may that be?' inquired the Canon.

Denis was silent and looked perplexed; but some time afterwards, when we were talking of other things, he called out, with the joy of one who has captured that elusive thing, a definition:

'In Aunt Cissy's church they climb trees and make toffee on Sundays.'

After which Lady Atherley seemed glad to take them both away with her.

It was perhaps this remark that led the Canon to ask, on the way to church—

'Is it true that Mrs. de Noël attends a dissenting chapel?'

'No,' said Lady Atherley. 'But I know why people say so. She lent a field last year to the Methodists to have their camp-meeting in.'

'Oh! but that is a pity,' said the Canon. 'A very great pity—a person in her position encouraging dissent, especially when there is no real occasion for it. Clara's nephew, young Littlemore, did something of the kind last year, but then he was standing for the county; and though that hardly justifies, it excuses, a little pandering to the multitude.'

'Cissy only let them have it once,' said Lady Atherley, as if making the best of it. 'And, indeed, I believe it rained so hard that day they were not able to have the meeting after all.'

Then the carriage stopped before the lych-gate, through which the fresh-faced school children were trooping; and while the bell clanged its last monotonous summons, we walked up between the village graves to the old church porch that older yews overshadow, where the village lads were loitering, as Sunday after Sunday their sleeping fore-fathers had loitered before them.

We worshipped that morning in a magnifi-

cent pew to one side of the chancel, and quite as large, from which we enjoyed a full view of clergy and congregation. The former consisted of the Canon, Mr. Jackson, clergyman of the parish, and a young man I had not seen before. Not a large number had mustered to hear the Canon ; the front seats were well filled by men and women in goodly apparel, but in the pews behind and in the side aisles there was a mere sprinkling of worshippers in the Sunday dress of country labourers. Our supplications were offered with as little ritualistic pageantry as Mrs. Mostyn herself could have desired, though the choir probably sang oftener and better than she would have approved. In spite of their efforts it was as uninspiring a service as I have ever taken part in. This was not due, as might be suspected, to Atherley's presence, for his demeanour was irreproachable. His little sons, delighted at having him with them, carefully found his places for him in prayer and hymn-book, and kept watch that he did not lose them afterwards, so that

he perforce assumed a really edifying degree of attention. Nor, indeed, did the rest of the congregation err in the direction of restlessness or wandering looks, but rather in the opposite extreme, insomuch that during the litany, when we were no longer supported by music, and had, most of us, assumed attitudes favourable to repose, we appeared one and all to succumb to it, especially towards the close, when, from the body of the church at least, only the aged clerk was heard to cry for mercy. But with the third service there came a change, which reminded me of how once in a foreign cathedral, when the procession filed by—the singing-men nudging each other, the standard-bearers giggling, and the English tourists craning to see the sight—the face of one white-haired old bishop beneath his canopy transformed for me a foolish piece of mummery into a prayer in action. So it was again, when the young stranger turned to us his pale clear-cut face, solemn with an awe as rapt as if he verily stood before the throne of

Him he called upon, and felt Its glory beating on his face; then, by that one earnest and believing presence, all was transformed and redeemed; the old emblems recovered their first significance, the time-worn phrases glowed with life again, and we ourselves were altered—our very heaviness was pathetic: it was the lethargy of death itself, and our poor sleepy prayers the strain of manacled captives striving to be free.

The Canon's sermon did not maintain this high-strung mood, though why not it would be difficult to say. Like all his, it was eloquent, brilliant even, declaimed by a fine voice of wide compass, whose varying tones he used with the skill of a practised orator. The text was 'Our conversation is in Heaven,' its theme the contrast between the man of this world, with his heart fixed upon its pomps, its vanities, its honours, and the believer indifferent to all these, esteeming them as dross merely compared to the heavenly treasure, the one thing needful. Certainly

the utter worthlessness of the prizes for which men labour and so late take rest, barter their happiness, their peace, their honour, was never more scathingly depicted. I remember the organ-like bass of his note in passages which denounced the grovelling worship of earthly pre-eminence and riches, the clarion-like cry with which he concluded a stirring eulogy of the Christian's nobler service of things unseen.

'Brethren, as His kingdom is not of this world, so too our kingdom is not of this world.'

'I think you will admit, George,' said Lady Atherley, as we left the church, 'that you have had a good sermon to-day.'

'Yes, indeed,' heartily assented Atherley. 'It was excellent. Your uncle certainly knows his business, which is more than can be said of most preachers. It was a really splendid performance. But who on earth was he talking about—those wonderful people who don't care for money or success, or the best of

everything generally? I never met any like them.'

'My dear George! How extraordinary you are! Any one could see, I should have thought, that he meant Christians.'

Atherley and the children walked home while we waited for the Canon, who stayed behind to exchange a few words in the vestry with his old schoolfellow, Mr. Jackson.

As we drove home he made, aloud, some reflections, probably suggested by the difference between their positions.

'It really grieves me to see Jackson where he is at his age. He deserves a better living. He is an excellent fellow, and not without ability, but wanting, unfortunately, in tact and *savoir-faire*. He always had an unhappy knack of blurting out the truth in season and out of season. I did my best to get him a good living once—a first-rate living—in Sir John Marsh's gift; and I warned him before he went to lunch with Sir John to be careful what he said. "Sir John," I said,

"is one of the old school; he thinks the Squire is pope of the parish, and you will have to humour him a little. He will talk a great deal of nonsense in this strain, and be careful not to contradict him, for he can't bear it." But Jackson did contradict him—flatly; he told me so himself, and of course Sir John would have nothing to say to him. "But he made such extravagant statements," said Jackson. "If I had kept quiet he would have thought I agreed with him."—"What did that matter?" I said. "Once you were vicar you could have shown him you didn't." —"The truth is," said Jackson, "I cannot sit by and hear black called white without protesting." That is Jackson all over! A man of that kind will never get on. And then, such an imprudent marriage —a woman without a penny!'

'I have never seen any one who wore such extraordinary bonnets,' said Lady Atherley.

'Who was that young man who bowed to the altar and crossed himself?' asked the Canon.

'I suppose that must be Mr. Austyn, curate in charge at Rood Warren. He comes over to help Mr. Jackson sometimes, I believe. George has met him; I have not. I want to get him over to dinner. He is a nephew of Mr. Austyn of Temple Leigh.'

'Oh, that family!' said the Canon. 'I am sorry he has taken up such an extreme line. It is a great mistake. In the Church, preferment in these days always goes to the moderate men.'

'Rood Warren is not far from here,' said Lady Atherley, 'and he has a parishioner—— Oh, that reminds me. Mr. Lyndsay, would you be so kind as to look out and tell the coachman to drive round by Monk's? I want to leave some soup.'

'Monk, I presume, is a sick labourer?' said the Canon. 'I hope you are not as indiscriminate in your charities as most Ladies Bountiful.'

'Mr. Jackson says this is a really deserving case. He knows all about him, though

he really is in Mr. Austyn's parish. Monk has never had anything from the parish, and been working hard all his life, and he is past seventy. He was breaking stones on the road a few weeks ago; but he caught a chill or something one very cold day, and has been laid up ever since. This is the house. Oh, Mr. Lyndsay, you should not trouble to get out. As you are so kind, will you carry this in?'

The interior of the tiny thatched cottage was scrupulously clean and neat, as they nearly all are in the valley, but barer and more scantily furnished than most of them. No photographs or pictures decorated the white-washed walls, no scraps of carpet or matting hid the red-brick floor. The Monks were evidently of the poorest. An old piece of faded curtain had been hung from a rope between the chimney-piece and the door to shield the patient from the draught. He sat in a stiff wooden arm-chair near the fire, drawing his breath laboriously. 'He was

better now,' said his wife, a nurse as old and as frail-looking as himself. 'Nights was the worst.' His shoulders were bent, his hair white with age, his withered features almost as coarse and as unshapely as the poor clothes he wore. The mask had been rough-hewn, to begin with; time and exposure had further defaced it. No gleam of intellectual life transpierced and illumined all. It was the face of an animal—ugly, ignorant, honest, patient. As I looked at it there came over me a rush of the pity I have so often felt for this suffering of age in poverty—so unpicturesque, so unwinning, to shallow sight so unpathetic—and I put out my hand and let it rest for a moment on his own, knotted with rheumatism, stained and seamed with toil. Then he looked up at me from under his shaggy brows with haggard, wistful eyes, and gasped: 'It's hard work, sir; it's hard work.' And I went out into the sunshine, feeling that I had heard the epitome of his life.

That night Mrs. Mallet surpassed herself by her rendering of a *menu*, especially composed by Atherley for the delectation of their guest. Their pains were not wasted. The Canon's commendation of each course—and we talked of little else, I remember, from soup to dessert—was as discriminating as it was warm.

'I am glad you approve of our cook, Uncle,' said Lady Atherley in the drawing-room afterwards, 'for she is only a stop-gap. Our own cook left us quite suddenly the other day, and we had such difficulty in finding this one to take her place. No one can imagine how inconvenient it is to have a haunted house.'

'My dear Jane, you don't mean to tell me you are afraid of ghosts?'

'Oh no, Uncle.'

'And I am sure your husband is not?'

'No; but unfortunately cooks are.'

'Eh! what?'

Then Lady Atherley willingly repeated the story of her troubles.

'Preposterous! perfectly preposterous!' cried the Canon. 'The Education Act in operation for all these years, and our lower orders still believe in bogies and hobgoblins! And yet it is hardly to be wondered at; their social superiors are not much wiser. The nonsense which is talked in society at present is perfectly incredible. Persons who are supposed to be in their right mind gravely relate to me such incidents that I could imagine myself transported to the Middle Ages. I hear of miraculous cures, of spirits summoned from the dead, of men and women floating in the air; and as to diabolic possession, it seems to have become as common as colds in the head.'

He had risen, and now addressed us from the hearthrug.

'Then Mrs. Molyneux and others come and tell me about personal friends of their own who can foretell everything that is going to happen; who can read your inmost thoughts; who can compel others to do this and to do

that, whether they like it or no; who, being themselves in one quarter of the globe, constantly appear to their acquaintances in another. "What!" I say. "They can be in two places at once, then! Certainly no conjurer can equal that!"'

'And what do they say to that?' asked Atherley.

'Oh, they assure me the extraordinary beings who perform these marvels are not impostors, but very superior and religious characters. "If they are not impostors," I say, "then their right place is the lunatic asylum." "Oh but, Canon Vernade, you don't understand; it is only our Western ignorance which makes such things seem astonishing! Far more marvellous things are going on, and have been going on for centuries, in the East; for instance, in the Brotherhoods of—I forget —some unpronounceable name." "And how do you know they have?" I ask. "Oh, by their traditions, which have been handed on for generations." "That is very reliable

information, indeed," I say. "Pray, have you ever played a game of Russian scandal?" "Well; but, then, there are the sacred books. There can be no mistake about them, for they have been translated by learned European professors, who say the religious sentiments are perfectly beautiful." "Very possibly," I say. "But it does not follow that the historical statements are correct."

'I gave my ladies' Bible-class a serious lecture about it all the other day. I said: "Do, my dear ladies, get rid of these childish notions, these uncivilised hankerings after marvels and magic, which make you the dupe of one charlatan after another. Take up science, for a change; study natural philosophy; try and acquire accurate notions of the system under which we live; realise that we are not moving on the stage of a Christmas pantomime, but in a universe governed by fixed laws, in which the miraculous performances you describe to me never can, and never could, have taken place. And be sure of this,

that any book and any teacher, however admirable their moral teaching, who tell you that two and two make anything but four, are not inspired, so far as arithmetic and common sense are concerned."'

'Hear, hear!' cried Atherley heartily.

The Canon's brow contracted a little.

'I need hardly explain,' he said, 'that what I said did not apply to revealed truth. Jane, my dear, as I must leave by an early train to-morrow, I think I shall say good-night.'

I fell asleep that night early, and dreamt that I was sitting with Gladys in the frescoed dining-room of an old Italian palace. It was night, and through the open window came one long shaft of moonlight, that vanished in the aureole of the shaded lamp standing with wine and fruit upon the table between us. And I said in my dream—

'Oh, Gladys, will it be always like this, or must we part again?'

And she, smiling her slow soft smile, said: 'You may stay with me till the knock comes.'

'What knock, my darling?'

But even as I spoke I heard it, low and penetrating, and I stretched out my arms imploringly towards Gladys; but she only smiled, and the knock was repeated, and the whole scene dissolved around me, and I was sitting up in bed in semi-darkness, while somebody was tapping with a quick agitated touch at my door. I remembered then that I had forgotten to unlock it before I went to bed, and I rose at once and made haste to open it, not without a passing thrill of unpleasant conjecture as to what might be behind it. It was a tall figure in a long gray garment, who carried a lighted candle in his hand. For a moment, startled and stupefied as I was, I failed to recognise the livid face.

'Canon Vernade! You are ill?'

Too ill to speak, it would seem, for without a word he staggered forward and sank into a chair, letting the candle almost drop from his hand on to the table beside him; but when I put out my hand to ring the bell, he stayed

me by a gesture. I looked at him, deadly pale, with blue shadows about the mouth and eyes, his head thrown helplessly back, and then I remembered some brandy I had in my dressing-bag. He took the glass from me and raised it to his lips with a trembling hand. I stood watching him, and debating within myself whether I should disobey him by calling for help or not; but presently, to my great relief, I saw the stimulant take effect, and life come slowly surging back in colour to his cheeks, in strength to his whole prostrate frame. He straightened himself a little, and turned upon me a less distracted gaze than before.

'Mr. Lyndsay, there is something horrible in this house.'

'Have you seen it?'

He shook his head.

'I saw nothing; it is what I felt.'

He shuddered.

I looked towards the grate. The fire had long been out, but the wood was still uncon-

sumed, and I managed, inexpertly enough, to relight it. When a long blue flame sprang up, he drew his chair near the hearth and stretched towards the blaze his still tremulous hands.

'Mr. Lyndsay,' he said, in a voice as strangely altered as his whole appearance, 'may I sit here a little—till it is light? I dread to go back to that room. But don't let me keep you up.'

I said, and in all honesty, that I had no inclination to sleep. I put on my dressing-gown, threw a rug over his knees, and took my place opposite to him on the other side of the fire; and thus we kept our strange vigil, while slowly above us broke the grim, cold dawn of early spring-time, which even the birds do not brighten with their babble.

Silently staring into the fire, he vouchsafed no further explanations, and I did not venture to ask for any; but I doubt if even such language as he could command would have been so full of horrible suggestion as that gray set

face, and the terror-stricken gaze, which the growing light made every minute more distinct, more weird. What had so suddenly and so completely overthrown, not his own strength merely, but the defences of his faith? He groped amongst them still, for, from time to time, I heard him murmuring to himself familiar verses of prayer and psalm and gospel, as if he sought therewith to banish some haunting fear, to quiet some torturing suspicion. And at last, when the dull grav day had fully broken, he turned towards me, and cried in tones more heart-piercing than ever startled the great congregations in church or cathedral—

'What if it were all a delusion, and there be no Father, no Saviour?'

And the horror of that abyss into which he looked, flashing from his mind to my own, left me silent and helpless before him. Yet I longed to give him comfort; for, with the regal self-possession which had fallen from him, there had slipped from me too some unde-

fined instinct of distrust and disapproval. All that I felt now was the sad tie of brotherhood which united us, poor human atoms, strong only in our capacity to suffer, tossed and driven, whitherward we knew not, in the purposeless play of soulless and unpitying forces.

CHAPTER V

AUSTYN'S GOSPEL

'He did not see the ghost, you say; he only felt it? I should think he did—on his chest. I never heard of a clearer case of nightmare. You must be careful whom you tell the story to, old chap; for at the first go-off it sounds as if it was not merely eating too much that was the matter. It was, however, indigestion, sure enough. No wonder! If a man of his age who takes no exercise will eat three square meals a day, what else can he expect? And Mallet is rather liberal with her cream.'

Atherley it was, of course, who propounded this simple interpretation of the night's alarms, as he sat in his smoking-room review-

ing his trout-flies after an early breakfast we had taken with the Canon.

'You always account for the mechanism, but not for the effect. Why should indigestion take that mental form?'

'Why, because indigestion constantly does in sleep, and out of it as well, for that matter. A nightmare is not always a sense of oppression on the chest only; it may be an overpowering dread of something you dream you see. Indigestion can produce, waking or asleep, a very good imitation of what is experienced in a blue funk. And there is another kind of dream which is produced by fasting—that, I need hardly say, I have never experienced. Indeed, I don't dream.'

'But the ghost—the ghost he almost saw.'

'The sinking horror produced the ghost, instead of *vice versâ*, as you might suppose. It is like a dream. In unpleasant dreams we fancy it is the dream itself which makes us feel uncomfortable. It is just the other way round. It is the discomfort that produces

the dream. Have you ever dreamt you were tramping through snow, and felt cold in consequence? I did the other night. But I did not feel cold because I dreamt I was walking through snow, but because I had not enough blankets on my bed; and because I felt cold I dreamt about the snow. Don't you know the dream you make up in a few moments about the knocking at the door when they call you in the morning? And ghosts are only waking dreams.'

'I wonder if you ever had an illusion yourself—gave way to it, I mean. You were in love once—twice,' I added hastily, in deference to Lady Atherley.

'Only once,' said Atherley calmly. 'Do you ever see her now, Lindy? She has grown enormously fat. Certainly I have had my illusions, and I don't object to them when they are pleasant and harmless—on the contrary. Now, falling in love, if you don't fall too deep, is pleasant, and it never lasts long enough to do much mischief. Marriage,

of course, you will say, may be mischievous—only for the individual, it is useful for the race. What I object to is the deliberate culture of illusions which are not pleasant but distinctly depressing, like half your religious beliefs.'

'George,' said Lady Atherley, coming into the room at this instant; 'have you—oh, dear! what a state this room is in!'

'It is the housemaids. They never will leave things as I put them.'

'And it was only dusted and tidied an hour ago. Mr. Lyndsay, did you ever see anything like it?'

I said 'Never.'

'If Lindy has a fault in this world, it is that he is as pernickety, as my old nurse used to say—as pernickety as an old maid. The stiff formality of his room would give me the creeps, if anything could. The first thing I always want to do when I see it is to make hay in it.'

'It is what you always do do, before you have been an hour there,' I observed.

'Jane, in Heaven's name leave those things alone! Is this sort of thing all you came in for?'

'No; I really came in to ask if you had read Lucinda Molyneux's letter.'

'No, I have not; her writing is too bad for anything. Besides, I know exactly what she has got to say. She has at last found the religion which she has been looking for all her life, and she intends to be whatever it is for evermore.'

'That is not all. She wants to come and stay here for a few days.'

'What! Here? Now? Why, what—oh, I forgot the ghost! By Jove! You see, Jane, there are some advantages in having one on the premises when it procures you a visit from a social star like Mrs. Molyneux. But where are you going to put her? Not in the bachelor's room, where your poor uncle made such a night of it? It wouldn't hold her dressing-bag, let alone herself.'

'Oh, but I hope the pink room will be

ready. The plasterer from Whitford came out yesterday to apologise, and said he had been keeping his birthday.'

'Indeed! and how many times a year does he have a birthday?'

'I don't know, but he was quite sober; and he did the most of it yesterday and will finish it to-day, so it will be all right.'

'When is she coming, then?'

'To-morrow. You would have seen that if you had read the letter. And there is a message for you in it, too.'

'Then find me the place, like an angel; I cannot wade through all these sheets of hieroglyphics. In the postscript? Let me see: "Tell Sir George I look forward to explaining to him the religious teaching which I have been studying for months." Months! Come; there must be something in a religion which Mrs. Molyneux sticks to for months at a time—"studying for months under the guidance of its great apostle Baron Zinkersen——" What is this name? "The

deeper I go into it all, the more I feel in it that faith, satisfying to the reason as well as to the emotions, for which I have been searching all my life. It is certainly the religion of the future"—future underlined—"and I believe it will please even Sir George, for it so distinctly coincides with his own favourite theories." Favourite theories indeed! I haven't any. My mind is as open as day to truth from any quarter. Only I distrust apostles with no vowels in their names ever since that one, two years ago, made off with the spoons.'

'No, George, he did not take any plate. It was money, and money Lucinda gave him herself for bringing her letters from her father.'

'Where was her father, then?' I inquired, much interested.

'Well, he was—a—he was dead,' answered Lady Atherley; 'and after some time a very low sort of person called upon Lucinda and said she wrote all the letters; but Lucinda

could not get the money back without going to law, as some people wished her to do; but I am glad she did not, as I think the papers would have said very unpleasant things about it.'

'The apostle I liked best,' said Atherley, 'was the American one. I really admired old Stamps, and old Stamps admired me; for she knew I thoroughly understood what an unmitigated humbug she was. She had a fine sense of humour, too. How her eye used to twinkle when I asked posers at her prayer-meetings!'

'Dreadful woman!' cried Lady Atherley. 'Lucinda brought her to lunch once. Such black nails, and she said she could make the plates and dishes fly about the room, but I said I would rather not. I am thankful she does not want to bring this baron with her.'

'I would not have him. I draw the line there, and also at spiritual séances. I am too old for them. Do you remember one I took you to at Mrs. Molyneux's, Lindy, five years

ago, when they raised poor old Professor Delaine, and he danced on the table and spelt bliss with one *s*? I was haunted for weeks afterwards by the dread that there might be a future life, in which we should make fools of ourselves in the same way. What is this?'

'It is the carriage just come back from the station. Mr. Lyndsay and the little boys are going over to Rood Warren with a note for me. I hope you will see Mr. Austyn, Mr. Lyndsay, and persuade him to come over to-morrow.'

'What! To dine?' said Atherley. 'He won't come out to dinner in Lent.'

I thought so myself, but I was glad of the excuse to see again the delicate, austere face. As we drove along, I tried to define to myself the quality which marked it out from others. Not sweetness, not marked benevolence, but the repose of absolute spiritual conviction. Austyn's God can never be my God, and in his heaven I should find no rest; but, one among ten thousand, he believed in both, as the martyrs

believed who perished in the flames, with a faith which would have stood the atheist's test; —'We believe a thing, when we are prepared to act as if it were true.'

Rood Warren lay in a little hollow beside an armlet of the stream that waters all the valley. The hamlet consisted of a tiny church and a group of labourers' cottages, in one of which, presumably because there was no other habitation for him, the curate in charge made his home. An apple-faced old woman received me at the door, and hospitably invited me to wait within for Mr. Austyn's return from morning service, which I did, while the carriage, with the little boys and Tip in it, drove up and down before the door. The room in which I waited, evidently the one sitting-room, was destitute of luxury or comfort as a monk's cell.

Profusion there was in one thing only—books. They indeed furnished the room, clothing the walls and covering the table; but ornaments there were none, not even sacred or symbolical, save, indeed, one large and

beautifully-carved crucifix over a mantelpiece covered with letters and manuscripts. I have thought of this early home of Austyn's many a time as dignities have been literally thrust upon him by a world which since then has discovered his intellectual rank. He will end his days in a palace, and, one may confidently predict of him, remain as absolutely indifferent to his surroundings as in the little cottage at Rood Warren.

But he did not come, and presently his housekeeper came in with many apologies to explain he would not be back for hours, having started after service on a round of parish visiting instead of first returning home, as she had expected. She herself was plainly depressed by the fact. 'I did hope he would have come in for a bit of lunch first,' she said sadly.

All I could do was to leave the note, to which late in the day came an answer, declining simply and directly on the ground that he did not dine out in Lent.

'I cannot see why,' observed Lady Atherley,

as we sat together over the drawing-room fire after tea, 'because it is possible to have a very nice dinner without meat. I remember one we had abroad once at an hotel on Good Friday. There were sixteen courses, chiefly fish, no meat even in the soup, only cream and eggs and that sort of thing, all beautifully cooked with exquisite sauces. Even George said he would not mind fasting in that way. It would have been nice if he could have come to meet Mrs. Molyneux to-morrow. I am sure they must be connected in some way, because Lord——'

And then my mind wandered whilst Lady Atherley entered into some genealogical calculations, for which she has nothing less than a genius. My attention was once again captured by the name de Noël, how introduced I know not, but it gave me an excuse for asking—

'Lady Atherley, what is Mrs. de Noël like?'

'Cecilia? She is rather tall and rather fair, with brown hair. Not exactly pretty,

but very ladylike-looking. I think she would be very good-looking if she thought more about her dress.'

'Is she clever?'

'No, not at all; and that is very strange, for the Atherleys are such a clever family, and she has quite the ways of a clever person, too; so odd, and so stupid about little things that any one can remember. I don't believe she could tell you, if you asked her, what relation her husband was to Lord Stowell.'

'She seems a great favourite.'

'Oh, no one could possibly help liking her. She is the most good-natured person; there is nothing she would not do to help one; she is a dear thing, but most odd, so very odd. I often think it is so fortunate she married a sailor, because he is so much away from home.'

'Don't they get on, then?'

'Oh dear, yes; they are devoted to each other, and he thinks everything she does quite perfect. But then he is very different from most men; he thinks so little about eating, and he

takes everything so easy; I don't think he cares what strange people Cecilia asks to the house.'

'Strange people!'

'Well; strange people to have on a visit. Invalids and—people that have nowhere else they could go to.'

'Do you mean poor people from the East End?'

'Oh no; some of them are quite rich. She had an idiot there with his mother once who was heir to a very large fortune in the colonies somewhere; but of course nobody else would have had them, and I think it must have been very uncomfortable. And then once she actually had a woman who had taken to drinking. I did not see her, I am thankful to say, but there was a deformed person once staying there, I saw him being wheeled about the garden. It was very unpleasant. I think people like that should always live shut up.'

There was a little pause, and then Lady Atherley added—

'Cecilia has never been the same since her baby died. She used to have such a bright colour before that. He was not quite two years old, but she felt it dreadfully; and it was a great pity, for if he had lived he would have come in for all the Stowell property.'

The door opened.

'Why, George; how late you are, and—how wet! Is it raining?'

'Yes; hard.'

'Have you bought the ponies?'

'No; they won't do at all. But whom do you think I picked up on the way home? You will never guess. Your pet parson, Mr. Austyn.'

'Mr. Austyn!'

'Yes; I found him by the roadside not far from Monk's cottage, where he had been visiting, looking sadly at a spring-cart, which the owner thereof, one of the Rood Warren farmers, had managed to upset and damage considerably. He was giving Austyn a lift home when the spill took place. So, remem-

bering your hankering and Lindy's for the society of this young Ritualist, I persuaded him that instead of tramping six miles through the wet he should come here and put up for the night with us; so, leaving the farmer free to get home on his pony, I clinched the matter by promising to send him back to-morrow in time for his eight o'clock service.'

'Oh dear! I wish I had known he was coming. I would have ordered a dinner he would like.'

'Judging by his appearance, I should say the dinner he would like will be easily provided.'

Atherley was right. Mr. Austyn's dinner consisted of soup, bread, and water. He would not even touch the fish or the eggs elaborately prepared for his especial benefit. Yet he was far from being a skeleton at the feast, to whose immaterial side he contributed a good deal—not taking the lead in conversation, but readily following whosoever did, giving his opinions on one topic after another in the manner of a man well informed, cultured,

thoughtful, original even, and at the same time with no warmer interest in all he spoke of than the inhabitant of another planet might have shown.

Atherley was impressed and even surprised to a degree unflattering to the rural clergy.

'This is indeed a *rara avis* of a country curate,' he confided to me after dinner, while Lady Atherley was unravelling with Austyn his connection with various families of her acquaintance. 'We shall hear of him in time to come, if, in the meanwhile, he does not starve himself to death. By the way, I lay you odds he sees the ghost. To begin with, he has heard of it—everybody has in this neighbourhood; and then St. Anthony himself was never in a more favourable condition for spiritual visitations. Look at him; he is blue with asceticism. But he won't turn tail to the ghost; he'll hold his own. There's metal in him.'

This led me to ask Austyn, as we went down the bachelor's passage to our rooms, if he were afraid of ghosts.

'No; that is, I don't feel any fear now. Whether I should do so if face to face with one, is another question. This house has the reputation of being haunted, I believe. Have you seen the ghost yourself?'

'No, but I have seen others who did, or thought they did. Do you believe in ghosts?'

'I do not know that I have considered the subject sufficiently to say whether I do or not. I see no *primâ facie* objection to their appearance. That it would be supernatural offers no difficulty to a Christian whose religion is founded on, and bound up with the supernatural.'

'If you do see anything, I should like to know.'

I went away, wondering why he repelled as well as attracted me; what it was behind the almost awe-inspiring purity and earnestness I felt in him that left me with a chill sense of disappointment? The question was so perplexing and so interesting that I

determined to follow it up next day, and ordered my servant to call me as early as Mr. Austyn was wakened.

In the morning I had just finished dressing, but had not put out my candles, when a knock at the door was followed by the entrance of Austyn himself.

'I did not expect to find you up, Mr. Lyndsay; I knocked gently, lest you should be asleep. In case you were not, I intended to come and tell you that I had seen the ghost.'

'Breakfast is ready,' said a servant at the door.

'Let me come down with you and hear about it,' I said.

We went down through staircase and hall, still plunged in darkness, to the dining-room, where lamps and fire burned brightly. Their glow falling on Austyn's face showed me how pale it was, and worn as if from watching.

Breakfast was set ready for him, but he refused to touch it.

'But tell me what you saw.'

'I must have slept two or three hours when I awoke with the feeling that there was some one besides myself in the room. I thought at first it was the remains of a dream and would quickly fade away; but it did not, it grew stronger. Then I raised myself in bed and looked round. The space between the sash of the window and the curtains — my shutters were not closed — allowed one narrow stream of moonlight to enter and lie across the floor. Near this, standing on the brink of it, as it were, and rising dark against it, was a shadowy figure. Nothing was clearly outlined but the face; *that* I saw only too distinctly. I rose and remained up for at least an hour before it vanished. I heard the clock outside strike the hour twice. I was not looking at it all this time—on the contrary, my hands were clasped across my closed eyes; but when from time to time I turned to see if it was gone, it was

always there immovable, watchful. It reminded me of a wild beast waiting to spring, and I seemed to myself to be holding it at bay all the time with a great strain of the will, and, of course'—he hesitated for an instant, and then added—'in virtue of a higher power.'

The reserve of all his school forbade him to say more, but I understood as well as if he had told me that he had been on his knees, praying all the time, and there rose before my mind a picture of the scene—moonlight, kneeling saint and watching demon, which the leaf of some illustrated missal might have furnished.

The bronze timepiece over the fireplace struck half-past six.

'I wonder if the carriage is at the door,' said Austyn rather anxiously. He went into the hall and looked out through the narrow windows. There was no carriage visible, and I deeply regretted the second interruption that must follow when it did come.

'Let us walk up the hill and on a little way together. The carriage will overtake us. My curiosity is not yet satisfied.'

'Then first, Mr. Lyndsay, you must go back and drink some coffee; you are not strong as I am, or accustomed to go out fasting into the morning air.'

Outside in the shadow of the hill, where the fog lay thick and white, the gloom and the cold of the night still lingered, but as we climbed the hill we climbed, too, into the brightness of a sunny morning—brilliant, amber-tinted above the long blue shadows.

. . . . .

I had to speak first.

'Now tell me what the face was like.'

'I do not think I can. To begin with, I have a very indistinct remembrance of either the form or the colouring. Even at the time my impression of both was very vague; what so overwhelmed and transfixed my attention, to the exclusion of everything besides itself, was the look upon the face.'

'And that?'

'And that I literally cannot describe. I know no words that could depict it, no images that could suggest it; you might as well ask me to tell you what a new colour was like if I had seen it in my dreams, as some people declare they have done. I could convey some faint idea of it by describing its effect upon myself, but that too is very difficult — that was like nothing I have ever felt before. It was the realisation of much which I have affirmed all my life, and steadfastly believed as well, but only with what might be called a notional assent, as the blind man might believe that light is sweet, or one who had never experienced pain might believe it was something from which the senses shrink. Every day that I have recited the creed, and declared my belief in the Life Everlasting, I have by implication confessed my entire disbelief in any other. I knew that what seems so solid is not solid, so real is not

real; that the life of the flesh, of the senses, of things seen, is but the "stuff that dreams are made of"—"a dream within a dream," as one modern writer has called it; "the shadow of a dream," as another has it. But last night——'

He stood still, gazing straight before him, as if he saw something that I could not see.

'But last night?' I repeated, as we walked on again.

'Last night? I not only believed, I saw, I felt it with a sudden intuition conveyed to me in some inexplicable manner by the vision of that face. I felt the utter insignificance of what we name existence, and I perceived too behind it that which it conceals from us—the real Life, illimitable, unfathomable, the element of our true being with its eternal possibilities of misery or joy.'

'And all this came to you through something of an evil nature?'

'Yes; it was like the effect of lightning on a pitch-dark night—the same vivid and

lurid illumination of things unperceived before. It must be like the revelation of death, I should think, without, thank God, that fearful sense of the irrevocable which death must bring with it. Will you not rest here?'

For we had reached Beggar's Stile. But I was not tired for once, so keen, so life-giving was the air, sparkling with that fine elixir whereby morning braces us for the day's conflict. Below, through slowly-dissolving mists, the village showed as if it smiled, each little cottage hearth lifting its soft spiral of smoke to a zenith immeasurably deep, immaculately blue.

'But the ghost itself?' I said, looking up at him as we both rested our arms upon the gate. 'What do you think of that?'

'I am afraid there is no possible doubt what that was. Its face, as I tell you, was a revelation of evil—evil and its punishment. It was a lost soul.'

'Do you mean by a lost soul, a soul that is in never-ending torment?'

'Not in physical torment certainly; that would be a very material interpretation of the doctrine. Besides, the Church has always recognised degree and difference in the punishment of the lost. This, however, they all have in common — eternal separation from the Divine Being.'

'Even if they repent and desire to be reunited to Him?'

'Certainly; that must be part of their suffering.'

'And yet you believe in a good God?'

'In what else could I believe even without revelation? But goodness, divine goodness, is far from excluding severity and wrath, and even vengeance. Here the witness of science and of history are in accord with that of the Christian Church; their first manifestation of God is always of "one that is angry with us and threatens evil."'

The carriage had overtaken us and stopped now close to us. I rose to say good-bye. Austyn shook me by the hand and moved

towards the carriage; then, as if checked by a sudden thought, returned upon his steps and stood before me, his earnest eyes fixed upon me as if the whole self-denying soul within him hungered to waken mine.

'I feel I must speak one word before I leave you, even if it be out of season. With the recollection of last night still so fresh, even the serious things of life seem trifles, far more its small conventionalities. Mr. Lyndsay, your friend has made his choice, but you are dallying between belief and unbelief. Oh, do not dally long! We need no spirit from the dead to tell us life is short. Do we not feel it passing quicker and quicker every year? The one thing that is serious in all its shows and delusions is the question it puts to each one of us, and which we answer to our eternal loss or gain. Many different voices call to us in this age of false prophets, but one only threatens as well as invites. Would it not be only wise, prudent even, to give the preference to that? Mr. Lyndsay, I beseech

you, accept the teaching of the Church, which is one with that of conscience and of nature, and believe that there *is* a God, a Sovereign, a Lawgiver, a Judge.'

He was gone, and I still stood thinking of his words, and of his gaze while he spoke them.

The mists were all gone, now, leaving behind them in shimmering dewdrops an iridescent veil on mead and copse and garden; the river gleamed in diamond curves and loops, while in the covert near me the birds were singing as if from hearts that over-brimmed with joy.

And slowly, sadly, I repeated to myself the words—Sovereign, Lawgiver, Judge.

I was hungering for bread; I was given a stone.

CHAPTER VI

MRS. MOLYNEUX'S GOSPEL

'THE room is all ready now,' said Lady Atherley, 'but Lucinda has never written to say what train she is coming by.'

'A good thing too,' said Atherley; 'we shall not have to send for her. Those unlucky horses are worked off their legs already. Is that the carriage coming back from Rood Warren? Harold, run and stop it, and tell Marsh to drive round to the door before he goes to the stables. I may as well have a lift down to the other end of the village.'

'What do you want to do at the other end of the village?'

'I don't want to do anything, but my unlucky fate as a landowner compels me to

go over and look at an eel-weir which has just burst. Lindy, come along with me, and cheer me up with one of your ghost stories. You are as good as a Christmas annual.'

'And on your way back,' said Lady Atherley, 'would you mind the carriage stopping to leave some brandy at Monk's? Mr. Austyn told me last night he was so weak, and the doctor has ordered him brandy every hour.'

Atherley was disappointed with what he called my last edition of the ghost; he complained that it was little more definite than the Canon's.

'Your last two stories are too highflown for my simple tastes. I want a good coherent description of the ghost himself, not the peculiar emotions he excited. I had expected better things from Austyn. Upon my word, as far as we have gone, old Aunt Eleanour's is the best. I think Austyn, with his mediæval turn of mind and his quite mediæval habit of living upon air, might have managed to raise something with horns

and hoofs. It is a curious thing that in the dark ages the devil was always appearing to somebody. He doesn't make himself so cheap now. He has evidently more to do; but there is a fashion in ghosts as in other things, and that reminds me our ghost, from all we hear of it, is decidedly rococo. If you study the reports of societies that hunt the supernatural, you will find that the latest thing in ghosts is very quiet and commonplace. Rattling chains and blue lights, and even fancy dress, have quite gone out. And the people who see the ghosts are not even startled at first sight; they think it is a visitor, or a man come to wind the clocks. In fact, the chic thing for a ghost in these days is to be mistaken for a living person.'

'What puzzles me is that a sceptic like you can so easily swallow the astonishing coincidence of these different people all having imagined the ghost in the same house.'

'Why, the coincidence is not a bit more astonishing than several people in the same

place having the same fever. Nothing in the world is so infectious as ghost-seeing. The oftener a ghost is seen, the oftener it will be seen. In this sort of thing particularly, one fool makes many. No, don't wait for me. Heaven only knows when I shall be released.'

The door of Monk's cottage was open, but no one was to be seen within, and no one answered to my knock, so, anxious to see him again, I groped my way up the dark ladder-like stairs to the room above. The first thing I saw was the bed where Monk himself was lying. They had drawn the sheet across his face: I saw what had happened. His wife was standing near, looking not so much grieved as stunned and tired. 'Would you like to see him, sir?' she asked, stretching out her withered hand to draw the sheet aside. I was glad afterwards I had not refused, as, but for fear of being ungracious, I would have done.

Since then I have seen death—'in state,' as it is called—invested with more than royal

pomp, but I have never felt his presence so majestic as in that poor little garret. I know his seal may be painful, grotesque even: here it was wholly benign and beautiful. All discolorations had disappeared in an even pallor as of old ivory; all furrows of age and pain were smoothed away, and the rude peasant face was transfigured, glorified, by that smile of ineffable and triumphant repose.

Many times that day it rose before me, never more vividly than when, at dinner, Mrs. Molyneux, in colours as brilliant as her complexion, and jewels as sparkling as her eyes, recounted in her silvery treble the latest flowers of fashionable gossip. I am always glad to be one of any audience which Mrs. Molyneux addresses, not so much out of admiration for the discourse itself, as for the charm of gesture and intonation with which it is delivered. But the main question—the subject of Atherley's conversion—she did not approach till we were in the drawing-room, luxuriously established in deep and softly-

cushioned chairs. Then, near the fire, but turned away from it so as to face us all, and in the prettiest of attitudes, she began, gracefully emphasising her more important points by movements of her spangled fan.

'I do not mention the name of the religion I wish to speak to you about, because —now I hope you won't be angry, but I am going to be quite horribly rude—because Sir George is certain to be so prejudiced against —oh yes, Sir George, you are; everybody is at first. Even I was, because it has been so horribly misrepresented by people who really know nothing about it. For instance, I have myself heard it said that it was only a kind of spiritualism. On the contrary, it is very much opposed to it, and has quite convinced me for one of the wickedness and danger of spiritualism.'

'Well, that is so much to its credit,' Atherley generously acknowledged.

'And then, people said it was very immoral. Far from that; it has a very high ethical

standard indeed—a very high moral aim. One of its chief objects is to establish a universal brotherhood amongst men of all nations and sects.'

'A what?' asked Atherley.

'A universal brotherhood.'

'My dear Mrs. Molyneux, you don't mean to seriously offer that as a novelty. I never heard anything so hackneyed in my life. Why, it has been preached *ad nauseam* for centuries!'

'By the Christian Church, I suppose you mean. And, pray, how have they practised their preaching?'

'Oh, but excuse me; that is not the question. If your religion is as brand-new as you gave me to understand, there has been no time for practice. It must be all theory, and I hoped I was going to hear something original.'

'Oh really, Sir George, you are quite too naughty. How can I explain things if you are so flippant and impatient? In one sense it is a very old religion; it is the truth which

is in all religions, and some of its interesting doctrines were taught ages before Christianity was ever heard of, and proved, too, by miracles far far more wonderful than any in the New Testament. However, it is no good talking to you about that; what I really wanted you to understand is how infinitely superior it is to all other religions in its theological teaching. You know, Sir George, you are always finding fault with all the Christian Churches—and even with the Mahommedans too, for that matter—because they are so anthropomorphic, because they imply that God is a personal being. Very well, then, you cannot say that about this religion, because—this is what is so remarkable and elevated about it—it has nothing to do with God at all.'

'Nothing to do with what did you say?' asked Lady Atherley, diverted by this last remark from a long row of loops upon an ivory needle which she appeared to be counting.

'Nothing to do with God.'

'Do you know, Lucinda,' said Lady Atherley, 'if you would not mind, I fancy the coffee is just coming in, and perhaps it would be as well just to wait for a little, you know—just till the servants are out of the room? They might perhaps think it a little odd.'

'Yes,' said Atherley, 'and even unorthodox.'

Mrs. Molyneux submitted to this interruption with the greatest sweetness and composure, and dilated on the beauty of the new chair-covers till Castleman and the footman had retired, when, with a coffee-cup instead of a fan in her exquisite hand, she took up the thread of her exposition.

'As I was saying, the distinction of this religion is that it has nothing to do with God. Of course it has other great advantages, which I will explain later, like its cultivation of a sixth sense, for instance——'

'Do you mean common sense?'

'Jane, what am I to do with Sir George? He is really incorrigible. How

can I possibly explain things if you will not be serious?'

'I never was more serious in my life. Show me a religion which cultivates common sense, and I will embrace it at once.'

'It is just because I knew you would go on in this way that I do not attempt to say anything about the supernatural side of this religion, though it is very important and most extraordinary. I assure you, my dear Jane, the powers that people develop under it are really marvellous. I have friends who can see into another world as plainly as you can see this drawing-room, and talk as easily with spirits as I am talking with you.'

'Indeed!' said Lady Atherley politely, with her eyes fixed anxiously on something which had gone wrong with her knitting.

'Unfortunately, for that kind of thing you require to undergo such severe treatment; my health would not stand it; the London season itself is almost too much for me. It is a pity, for they all say I have great natural gifts that

way, and I should have so loved to have taken it up; but to begin with, one must have no animal food and no stimulants, and the doctors always tell me I require a great deal of both.'

'Besides, *le jeu ne vaut pas la chandelle*,' said Atherley, 'if the spirits you are to converse with are anything like those we used to meet in your drawing-room.'

'That is not the same thing at all; these were only spooks.'

'Only what?'

'No, I will not explain; you only mean to make fun of it, and there is nothing to laugh at. What I am trying to show you is that side of the religion you will really approve—the unanthropomorphic side. It is not anything like atheism, you know, as some ill-natured people have said; it does not declare there is no God; it only declares that it is worse than useless to try and think of Him, far less pray to Him—because it is simply impossible. And that is quite scientific and

philosophical, is it not? For all the great men are agreed now that the conditioned can know nothing of the unconditioned, and the finite can know nothing of the infinite. It is quite absurd to try, you know; and it is equally absurd to say anything about Him. You can't call Him Providence, because, as the universe is governed by fixed laws, there is nothing for Him to provide; and we have no business to call Him Creator, because we don't really know that things were created. Besides,' said Mrs. Molyneux, resuming her fan, which she furled and unfurled as she continued, 'I was reading in a delightful book the other day—I can't remember the author's name, but I think it begins with K or P. It explained so clearly that if the universe was created at all, it was created by the human mind. Then you can't call Him Father—it is quite blasphemous; and it is almost as bad to say He is merciful or loving, or anything of that kind, because mercy and love are only human attributes; and so is consciousness too,

therefore we know He cannot be conscious; and I believe, according to the highest philosophical teaching, He has not any Being. So that altogether it is impossible, without being irreverent, to think of Him, far less speak to Him or of Him, because we cannot do so without ascribing to Him some conceivable quality—and He has not any. Indeed, even to speak of Him as *He* is not right; the pronoun is very anthropomorphic and misleading. So, when you come to consider all this carefully, it is quite evident—though it sounds rather strange at first—that the only way you can really honour and reverence God is by forgetting Him altogether.'

Here Mrs. Molyneux paused, panting prettily for breath; but quickly recovering herself, proceeded: 'So, in fact, it is just the same, practically speaking—remember I say only practically speaking—as if there were no God; and this religion——'

'Excuse me,' said Atherley; 'but if, as you have so forcibly explained to us, there is, prac-

tically speaking, no God, why should we hamper ourselves with any religion at all?'

'Why, to satisfy the universal craving after an ideal; the yearning for something beyond the sordid realities of animal existence and of daily life; to comfort, to elevate——'

'No, no, my dear Mrs. Molyneux; pardon me, but the sooner we get rid of all this sort of rubbish the better. It is the indulgence they have given to such feelings that has made all the religions such a curse to the world. I don't believe, to begin with, that they are universal. I never experienced any such cravings and yearnings except when I was out of sorts; and I never met a thoroughly happy or healthy person who did. If people keep their bodies in good order and their minds well employed, they have no time for yearnings. It was bad enough when there was some pretext for them; when we imagined there was a God and a world which was better than this one. But now we know there is not the slightest ground for supposing anything

of the kind, we had better have the courage of our opinions, and live up to them, or down to them. As to the word "ideal," it ought to be expunged from the vocabulary; I would like to make it penal to pronounce, or write, or print the word for a century. Why, we have been surfeited with the ideal by the Christian Churches; that's why we find the real so little to our taste. We've been so long fed upon sweet trash, we can't relish wholesome food. The cure for that is to take wholesome food or starve, not provide another sickly substitute. Pray, let us have no more religions. On the contrary, our first duty is to be as irreligious as possible—to believe in as little as we can, to trust in nobody but ourselves, to hope for nothing but the actual, to get rid of all high-flown notions of human beings and their destiny, and, above all, to avoid as poison the ideal, the sublime, the——'

His words were drowned at last in musical cries of indignation from Mrs. Molyneux. I

remember no more of the discussion, except that Atherley continued to reiterate his doctrine in different words, and Mrs. Molyneux to denounce it with unabated fervour.

My thoughts wandered—I heard no more. I was tired and depressed, and felt grateful to Lady Atherley when, with invariable punctuality, at a quarter to eleven, she interrupted the symposium by rising and proposing that we should all go to bed.

My last distinct recollection of that evening is of Mrs. Molyneux, with the folds of her gown in one hand, and a bedroom candlestick in the other, mounting the dark oak stairs, and calling out fervently as she went—

'Oh, how I pray that I may see the ghost!'

The night was stormy, and I could not sleep. The wind wailed fitfully outside the house, while within doors and windows rattled, and on the stairs and in the passages wandered strange and unaccountable noises, like stealthy footsteps or stifled voices. To

this dreary accompaniment, as I lay awake in the darkness, I heard the lessons of the last few days repeated: witness after witness rose and gave his varying testimony; and when, before the discord and irony of it all, I bitterly repeated Pilate's question, the smile on that dead face would rise before me, and then I hoped again.

Between three and four the wind fell during a short space, and all responsive noises ceased. For a few minutes reigned absolute silence, then it was broken by two piercing cries—the cries of a woman in terror or in pain.

They disturbed even the sleepers, it was evident; for when I reached the end of my passage I heard opening doors, hurrying footsteps, and bells ringing violently in the gallery. After a little the stir was increased, presumably by servants arriving from the farther wing; but no one came my way till Atherley himself, in his dressing-gown, went hurriedly downstairs.

'Anything wrong?' I called as he passed me.

'Only Mrs. Molyneux's prayer has been granted.'

'Of course she was bound to see it,' he said next day, as we sat together over a late breakfast. 'It would have been a miracle if she had not; but if I had known the interview was to be followed by such unpleasant consequences I shouldn't have asked her down. I was wandering about for hours looking for an imaginary bottle of sal-volatile Jane described as being in her sitting-room; and Jane herself was up till late—or rather early—this morning, trying to soothe Mrs. Molyneux, who does not appear to have found the ghost quite such pleasant company as she expected. Oh yes, Jane is down; she breakfasted in her own room. I believe she is ordering dinner at this minute in the next room.'

Hardly had he said the words when outside, in the hall, resounded a prolonged and stentorian wail.

'What on earth is the matter now?' said Atherley, rising and making for the door. He opened it just in time for us to see Mrs. Mallet go by—Mrs. Mallet bathed in tears and weeping as I never have heard an adult weep before or since—in a manner which is graphically and literally described by the phrase 'roaring and crying.'

'Why, Mrs. Mallet! What on earth is the matter?'

'Send for Mrs. de Noël,' cried Mrs. Mallet in tones necessarily raised to a high and piercing key by the sobs with which they were accompanied. 'Send for Mrs. de Noël; send for that dear lady, and she will tell you whether a word has been said against my character till I come here, which I never wish to do, being frightened pretty nigh to death with what one told me and the other; and if you don't believe me, ask Mrs. Stubbs as keeps the little sweet-shop near the church, if any one in the village will so much as come up the avenue after dark; and says to me,

the very day I come here, "You have a nerve," she says; "I wouldn't sleep there if you was to pay me," she says; and I says, not wishing to speak against a family that was cousin to Mrs. de Noël, "Noises is neither here nor there," I says, "and ghostisses keeps mostly to the gentry's wing," I says. And then to say as I put about that they was all over the house, and frighten the London lady's maid, which all I said was—and Hann can tell you that I speak the truth, for she was there—"some says one thing," says I, "and some says another, but I takes no notice of nothink." But put up with a deal, I have—more than ever I told a soul since I come here, which I promised Mrs. de Noël when she asked me to oblige her; which the blue lights I have seen a many times, and tapping of coffin-nails on the wall, and never close my eyes for nights sometimes, but am entirely wore away, and my nerve that weak; and then to be so hurt in my feelings, and spoke to as I am not accustomed, but always treated

everywhere I goes with the greatest of kindness and respect, which ask Mrs. de Noël she will tell you, since ever I was a widow; but pack my things I will, and walk every step of the way, if it was pouring cats and dogs, I would, rather than stay another minute here to be so put upon; and send for Mrs. de Noël if you don't believe me, and she will tell you the many high families she recommended me, and always give satisfaction. Send for Mrs. de Noël——'

The swing door closed behind her, and the sounds of her grief and her reiterated appeals to Mrs. de Noël died slowly away in the distance.

'What on earth have you been saying to her?' said Atherley to his wife, who had come out into the hall.

'Only that she behaved very badly indeed in speaking about the ghost to Mrs. Molyneux's maid, who, of course, repeated it all directly and made Lucinda nervous. She is a most troublesome, mischievous old woman.'

'But she can cook. Pray what are we to do for dinner?'

'I am sure I don't know. I never knew anything so unlucky as it all is, and Lucinda looking so ill.'

'Well, you had better send for the doctor.'

'She won't hear of it. She says nobody could do her any good but Cecilia.'

'What! "Send for Mrs. de Noel?" Poor Cissy! What do these excited females imagine she is going to do?'

'I don't know, but I do wish we could get her here.'

'But she is in London, is she not, with Aunt Henrietta?'

'Yes, and only comes home to-day.'

'Well, I will tell you what we might do if you want her badly. Telegraph to her to London and ask her to come straight on here.'

'I suppose she is sure to come?'

'Like a shot, if you say we are all ill.'

'No, that would frighten her. I will just say we want her particularly.'

'Yes, and say the carriage shall meet the 5.15 at Whitford station, and then she will feel bound to come. And as I shall not be back in time, send Lindy to meet her. It will do him good. He looks as if he had been sitting up all night with the ghost.'

It was a melancholy day. The wind was quieter, but the rain still fell. Indoors we were all in low spirits, not even excepting the little boys, much concerned about Tip, who was not his usual brisk and complacent self. His nose was hot, his little stump of a tail was limp, he hid himself under chairs and tables, whence he turned upon us sorrowful and beseeching eyes, and, most alarming symptom of all, refused sweet biscuits. During the afternoon he was confided to me by his little masters while they made an expedition to the stables, and I was sitting reading by the library fire with the invalid beside me when Lady Atherley came in to propose I should go into the drawing-room and talk to Mrs. Molyneux, who had just come down.

'Did she ask to see me?'

'No; but when I proposed your going in, she did not say no.'

I did as I was asked to do, but with some misgivings. It was one of the few occasions when my misfortune became an advantage. No one, especially no woman, was likely to rebuff too sharply the intruder who dragged himself into her presence. So far from that, Mrs. Molyneux, who was leaning against the mantelpiece and looking down listlessly into the fire, moved to welcome me with a smile and to offer me a hand startlingly cold. But after that she resumed her first attitude and made no attempt to converse—she, the most ready, the most voluble of women. Then followed an awkward pause, which I desperately broke by saying I was afraid she was not better.

'Better! I was not ill,' she answered, almost impatiently, and walked away towards the other side of the room. I understood that she wished to be alone, and was moving to-

wards the door as quietly as possible when I was suddenly checked by her hand upon my elbow.

'Mr. Lyndsay, why are you going? Was I rude? I did not mean to be. Forgive me; I am so miserable.'

'You could not be rude, I think, even if you wished to. It is I who am inconsiderate in intruding——'

'You are not intruding; please stay.'

'I would gladly stay if I could help you.'

'Can any one help me, I wonder?'

She went slowly back to the fire and sat down upon the fender-stool, and resting her chin upon her hand, and looking dreamily before her, repeated—

'Can any one help me, I wonder?'

I sat down on a chair near her and said—

'Do you think it would help you to talk of what has frightened you?'

'I don't think I can. I would tell you, Mr. Lyndsay, if I could tell any one; for you know what it is to be weak and suffering; you

are as sympathetic as a woman, and more merciful than some women. But part of the horror of it all is that I cannot explain it. Words seem to be no good, just because I have used them so easily and so meaninglessly all my life—just as words and nothing more.'

'Can you tell me what you saw?'

'A face, only a face, when I woke up suddenly. It looked as if it were painted on the darkness. But oh, the dreadfulness of it and what it brought with it! Do you remember the line, "Bring with you airs from heaven or blasts from hell"? Yes, it was in hell, because hell is not a great gulf, like Dante described, and I used to think; it is no place at all—it is something we make ourselves. I felt all this as I saw the face, for we ourselves are not what we think. Part of what I used to play with was true enough; it is all Mâyâ, a delusion, this sense life—it is no life at all. The actual life is behind, under it all; it goes deep deep down, it stretches on, on—and yet it has nothing to do with space or time. I feel as if

I were beating myself against a stone wall. My words can have no sense for you any more than they would have had for me yesterday.'

'But tell me, why should this discovery of this other life make you so miserable?'

'Oh, because it brings such a want with it. How can I explain? It is like a poor wretch stupefied with drink. Don't you know the poor creatures in the East-end sometimes drink just that they may not feel how hungry and how cold they are? "They remember their misery no more." Is the life of the world and of outward things like that, if we live too much in it? I used to be so contented with it all—its pleasures, its little triumphs, even its gossip; and what I called my aspirations I satisfied with what was nothing more than phrases. And now I have found my real self, now I am awake, I want much more, and there is nothing—only a great silence, a great loneliness like that in the face. And the theories I talked about are no comfort any more; they are just what pretty speeches would be to a

person in torture. Oh, Mr. Lyndsay, I always feel that you are real, that you are good; tell me what you know. Is there nothing but this dark void beyond when life falls away from us?'

She lifted towards me a face quivering with excitement, and eyes that waited wild and famished for my answer,—the answer I had not for her, and then indeed I tasted the full bitterness of the cup of unbelief.

'No,' she said presently, 'I knew it; no one can do me any good but Cecilia de Noël.'

'And she believes?'

'It is not what she believes, it is what she is.'

She rested her head upon her hand and looked musingly towards the window, down which the drops were trickling, and said—

'Ever since I have known Cecilia I have always felt that if all the world failed this would be left. Not that I really imagined the world would fail me, but you know how one imagines things, how one asks oneself questions.

If I was like this, if I was like that, what should I do? I used to say to myself, if the very worst happened to me, if I was ill of some loathsome disease from which everybody shrank away, or if my mind was unhinged and I was tempted with horrible temptations like I have read about, I would go to Cecilia. She would not turn from me; she would run to meet me as the father in the parable did, not because I was her friend but because I was in trouble. All who are in trouble are Cecilia's friends, and she feels to them just as other people feel towards their own children. And I could tell her everything, show her everything. Others feel the same; I have heard them say so—men as well as women. I know why—Cecilia's pity is so reverent, so pure. A great London doctor said to me once, "Remember, nothing is shocking or disgusting to a doctor." That is like Cecilia. No suffering could ever be disgusting or shocking to Cecilia, nor ridiculous, nor grotesque. The more humiliating it was, the more pitiful it would

be to her. Anything that suffers is sacred to Cecilia. She would comfort, as if she went on her knees to one; and her touch on one's wounds, one's ugliest wounds, would be like,'—she hesitated and looked about her in quest of a comparison, then, pointing to a picture over the door, a picture of the Magdalene, kissing the bleeding feet upon the Cross, ended, 'like that.'

'Oh, Mrs. Molyneux,' I cried, 'if there be love like that in the world, then——'

The door opened and Castleman entered.

'If you please, sir, the carriage is at the door.'

CHAPTER VII

CECILIA'S GOSPEL

THE rain gradually ceased falling as we drove onward and upward to the station. It stood on high ground, overlooking a wide sweep of downland and fallow, bordered towards the west by close-set woodlands, purple that evening against a sky of limpid gold, which the storm-clouds discovered as they lifted.

I had not long to wait, for, punctual to its time, the train steamed into the station. From that part of the train to which I first looked, four or five passengers stepped out; not one of them certainly the lady that I waited for. Glancing from side to side I saw, standing at the far end of the platform, two women; one of them was tall; could this be Mrs. de Noël?

And yet no, I reflected as I went towards them, for she held a baby in her arms—a baby moreover swathed, not in white and laces, but in a tattered and discoloured shawl; while her companion, lifting out baskets and bundles from a third-class carriage, was poorly and even miserably clad. But again, as I drew nearer, I observed that the long fine hand which supported the child was delicately gloved, and that the cloak which swung back from the encircling arm was lined and bordered with very costly fur. This and something in the whole outline——

'Mrs. de Noël?' I murmured inquiringly.

Then she turned towards me, and I saw her, as I often see her now in dreams, against that sunset background of aerial gold which the artist of circumstance had painted behind her, like a new Madonna, holding the child of poverty to her heart, pressing her cheek against its tiny head with a gesture whose exquisite tenderness, for at least that fleeting instant, seemed to bridge across the gulf which

still yawns between Dives and Lazarus. So standing, she looked at me with two soft brown eyes, neither large nor beautiful, but in their outlook direct and simple as a child's. Remembering as I met them what Mrs. Molyneux had said, I saw and comprehended as well what she meant. Benevolence is but faintly inscribed on the faces of most men, even of the better sort. "I will love you, my neighbour," we thereon decipher, "when I have attended to my own business, in the first place; if you are lovable, or at least likable, in the second." But in the transparent gaze that Cecilia de Noël turned upon her fellows beamed love poured forth without stint and without condition. It was as if every man, woman, and child who approached her became instantly to her more interesting than herself, their defects more tolerable, their wants more imperative, their sorrows more moving than her own. In this lay the source of that mysterious charm so many have felt, so few have understood, and yielding to which even

those least capable of appreciating her confessed that, whatever her conduct might be, she herself was irresistibly lovable. A kind of dream-like haze seemed to envelop us as I introduced myself, as she smiled upon me, as she resigned the child to its mother and bid them tenderly farewell; but the clear air of the real became distinct again when there stood suddenly before us a fat elderly female, whose countenance was flushed with mingled anxiety and displeasure.

'Law bless me, mem!' said the newcomer, 'I could not think wherever you could be. I have been looking up and down for you, all through the first-class carriages.'

'I am so sorry, Parkins,' said Mrs. de Noël penitently; 'I ought to have let you know that I changed my carriage at Carchester. I wanted to nurse a baby whose mother was looking ill and tired. I saw them on the platform, and then they got into a third-class carriage, so I thought the best way would be to get in with them.'

'And where, if you please, mem,' inquired Parkins, in an icy tone and with a face stiffened by repressed displeasure—'where do you think you have left your dressing-bag and humbrella?'

Mrs. de Noël fixed her sweet eyes upon the speaker, as if striving to recollect the answer to this question, and then replied—

'She told me she lived quite near the station. I wish I had asked her how far. She is much too weak to walk any distance. I might have found a fly for her, might I not?'

Upon which Parkins gave a snort of irrepressible exasperation, and, evidently renouncing her mistress as beyond hope, forthwith departed in search of the missing property. I accompanied her, and, with the aid of the guard, we speedily found and secured both bag and umbrella, and, as the train steamed off, returned with these treasures to Mrs. de Noël, still on the same spot and in the same attitude as we had left her, and all that she said was—

'It was so stupid, so forgetful, so just like me not to have asked her more about it. She had been ill; the journey itself was more than she could stand; and then to have to carry the baby! She said it was not far, but perhaps she only said that to please me. Poor people are so afraid of distressing one; they often make themselves out better off than they really are, don't they?'

I was embarrassed by this question, to which my own experience did not authorise me to answer yes; but I evaded the difficulty by consulting a porter, who fortunately knew the woman, and was able to assure us that her cottage was barely a stone's throw from the station. When I had conveyed to Mrs. de Noël this information, which she received with an eager gratitude that the recovery of her bag and umbrella had failed to rouse, we left the station to go to the carriage, and then it was that, pausing suddenly, she cried out in dismay—

'Ah, you are hurt! you——'

She stopped abruptly; she had divined the truth, and her eyes grew softer with such tender pity as not yet had shone for me—motherless, sisterless—on any woman's face. As we drove home that evening she heard the story that never had been told before.

'You may have your faults, Cissy,' said Atherley, 'but I will say this for you—for smoothing people down when they have been rubbed the wrong way, you never had your equal.'

He lay back in a comfortable chair looking at his cousin, who, sitting on a low seat opposite the drawing-room fire, shaded her eyes from the glare with a little hand-screen.

'Mrs. Molyneux, I hear, has gone to sleep,' he went on; 'and Mrs. Mallet is unpacking her boxes. The only person who does not seem altogether happy is my old friend Parkins. When I inquired after her health a few minutes ago her manner to me was barely civil.'

'Poor Parkins is rather put out,' said Mrs.

de Noël in her slow gentle way. 'It is all my fault. I forgot to pack up the bodice of my best evening gown, and Parkins says it is the only one I look fit to be seen in.'

'But, my dear Cecilia,' said Lady Atherley, looking up from the work which she pursued beside a shaded lamp, 'why did not Parkins pack it up herself?'

'Oh, because she had some shopping of her own to do this forenoon, so she asked me to finish packing for her, and of course I said I would; and I promised to try and forget nothing; and then, after all, I went and left the bodice in a drawer. It is provoking! The fact is, James spoils me so when he is at home. He remembers everything for me, and when I do forget anything he never scolds me.'

'Ah, I expect he has a nice time of it,' said Atherley. 'However, it is not my fault. I warned him how it would be when he was engaged. I said: "I hope, for one thing, you can live on air, old chap, for you will get

nothing more for dinner if you trust to Cissy to order it."'

'I don't believe you said anything of the kind,' observed Lady Atherley.

'No, dear Jane; of course he did not. He was very much pleased with our marriage. He said James was the only man he ever knew who was fit to marry me.'

'So he was,' agreed Atherley; 'the only man whose temper could stand all he would have to put up with. We had good proof of that even on the wedding-day, when you kept him kicking his heels for half an hour in the church while you were admiring the effect of your new finery in the glass.'

'What!' cried Lady Atherley incredulously.

'What really did happen, Jane,' said Mrs. de Noël, 'was that when Edith Molyneux was trying on my wreath before a looking-glass over the fireplace, she unfortunately dropped it into the grate, and it got in such a mess. It took us a long time to get the black off, and some of the sprays were so spoiled,

we had to take them out. And it was very unpleasant for Edith, as Aunt Henrietta was extremely angry, because the wreath was her present, you know, and it was very expensive; and as to Parkins, poor dear, she was so vexed she positively cried. She said I was the most trying lady she had ever waited upon. She often says so. I am afraid it is true.'

'Not a doubt of it,' said Atherley.

'Do not believe him, Cecilia,' said Lady Atherley; 'he thinks there is no one in the world like you.'

'Fortunately for the world,' said Atherley; 'any more of the sort would spoil it. But I am not going to stay here to be bullied by two women at once. Rather than that, I will go and write letters.'

He went, and soon afterwards Lady Atherley followed him.

Then the two little boys came in with Tip.

'We are not allowed to take him upstairs,' explained Harold, 'so we thought he might

stay with you and Mr. Lyndsay for a little, till Charles comes for him.'

'If you would let him lie upon your dress, Aunt Cissy,' suggested Denis; 'he would like that.'

Accordingly he was carefully settled on the outspread folds of the serge gown; and after the little boys had condoled with him in tones so melancholy that he was affected almost to tears, they went off to supper and to bed.

Silence followed, broken only by the ticking of the clock and the wailing of the wind outside. Mrs. de Noël gazed into the fire with intent and unseeing eyes. Its warm red light softly illumined her whole face and figure, for in her abstraction she had let the hand-screen fall, and was stroking mechanically the little sleek head that nestled against her. Meantime I stared attentively at her, thinking I might do so without offence, seeing she had forgotten me and all else around her. Once, indeed, as if rising for a minute to the

surface, with eyes that appeared to waken, she looked up and encountered my earnest gaze, but without shade of displeasure or discomfiture. She only smiled upon me, placidly as a sister might smile upon a brother, benignly as one might smile upon a child, and fell into her dream again. It was a wonderful look, especially from a woman, as unique in its complete unconsciousness as in its warm good-will; it was as soothing as the touch of her fine soft fingers must have been on Tip's hot head. I felt I could have curled myself up, as he did, at her feet and slept on—for ever. But, alas! the clock was checking the flying minutes and chanting the departing quarters, and presently the dressing-bell rang. Mrs. de Noël stirred, gave a long sigh, and, plainly from the fulness of her heart and of the thoughts she had so long been following, said—

'Mr. Lyndsay, is it not strange? So many people from the great world come and ask me if there is any God. Really good people, you

know, so honourable, so generous, so self-sacrificing. It is just the same to me as if they should ask me whether the sun was shining, when all the time I saw the sunshine on their faces.'

'By the way,' said Atherley that night after dinner, when Mrs. Molyneux was not present, 'where are you going to put Cissy to-night? Are you going to make a bachelor of her too?'

'Oh, such an uncomfortable arrangement!' said Lady Atherley. 'But Lucinda has set her heart on having Cecilia near her; so they have put up a little bed in the dressing-room for her.'

'Cissy is to keep the ghost at bay, is she?' said Atherley. 'I hope she may. I don't want another night as lively as the last.'

'Who else has seen the ghost?' asked Mrs. de Noël thoughtfully. 'Has Mr. Lyndsay?'

'No, Lindy will never see the ghost; he is too much of a sceptic. Even if he saw it he would not believe in it, and there is nothing a

ghost hates like that. But he has seen the people who saw the ghost, and he tells their several stories very well.'

'Would you tell me, Mr. Lyndsay?' asked Mrs. de Noël.

I could do nothing but obey her wish; still I secretly questioned the wisdom of doing so, especially when, as I went on, I observed stealing over her listening face the shadow of some disturbing thought.

'Well now, Cissy is thoroughly well frightened,' observed Atherley. 'Perhaps we had better go to bed.'

'It is no good saying so to Lucinda,' said Lady Atherley, as we all rose, 'because it only puts her out; but I shall always feel certain myself it was a mouse; because I remember in the house we had at Bournemouth two years ago there was a mouse in my room which often made such a noise knocking down the plaster inside the wall, it used to quite startle me.'

That night the storm finally subsided.

When the morning came the rain fell no longer, the cry of the wind had ceased, and the cloud-curtain above us was growing lighter and softer as if penetrated and suffused by the growing sunshine behind it.

I was late for breakfast that day.

'Mr. Lyndsay, Tip is all right again,' cried Denis at sight of me. 'Mrs. Mallet says it was chicken bones he stole from the cat's dish.'

'Is that all?' observed Atherley sardonically; 'I thought he must have seen the ghost. By the bye, Cissy, did you see it?'

'Yes,' said Mrs. de Noël simply, at which Atherley visibly started, and instantly began talking of something else.

Mrs. Molyneux was to leave by an afternoon train, but, to the relief of everybody, it was discovered that Mrs. Mallet had indefinitely postponed her departure. She remained in the mildest of humours and in the most philosophical of tempers, as I myself can testify; for, meeting her by accident in the hall, I was encouraged by the amiability of

her simper to say that I hoped we should have no more trouble with the ghost, when she answered in words I have often since admiringly quoted—

'Perhaps not, sir, but I don't seem to care even if we do; for I had a dream last night, and a spirit seemed to whisper in my ear, "Don't be afraid; it is only a token of death."'

After Mrs. Molyneux had started, with Mrs. de Noël as her companion as far as the station, and all the rest of the party had gone out to sun themselves in the brightness of the afternoon, I worked through a long arrears of correspondence; and I was just finishing a letter, when Atherley, whom I supposed to be far distant, came into the library.

'I thought you had gone to pay calls with Lady Atherley?'

'Is it likely? Look here, Lindy, it is quite hot out of doors. Come, and let me tug you up the hill to meet Cissy coming home from the station, and then I promise you a rare treat.'

Certainly to meet Mrs. de Noël anywhere might be so considered, but I did not ask if that was what he meant. It was milder; one felt it more at every step upward. The sun, low as it was, shone warmly as well as brilliantly between the clouds that he had thrust asunder and scattered in wild and beautiful disorder. It was one of those incredible days in early spring, balmy, tender, which our island summer cannot always match.

We went on till we reached Beggar's Stile.

'Sit down,' said Atherley, tossing on to the wet step a coat he carried over his arm. 'And there is a cigarette; you must smoke, if you please, or at least pretend to do so.'

'What does all this mean? What are you up to, George?'

'I am up to a delicate psychical investigation which requires the greatest care. The medium is made of such uncommon stuff; she has not a particle of brass in her composition. So she requires to be carefully isolated from all disturbing influences. I allow you to be

present at the experiment, because discretion is one of your strongest points, and you always know when to hold your tongue. Besides, it will improve your mind. Cissy's story is certain to be odd, like herself, and will illustrate what I am always saying that—— Here she is.'

He went forward to meet and to stop the carriage, out of which, at his suggestion, Mrs. de Noël readily came down to join us.

'Do not get up, Mr. Lyndsay,' she called out as she came towards us, 'or I will go away. I don't want to sit down.'

'Sit down, Lindy,' said Atherley sharply, 'Cissy likes tobacco in the open air.'

She rested her arms upon the gate and looked downwards.

'The dear dear old river! It makes me feel young again to look at it.'

'Cissy,' said Atherley, his arms on the gate, his eyes staring straight towards the opposite horizon, 'tell us about the ghost; were you frightened?'

There was a certain tension in the pause which followed. Would she tell us or not? I almost felt Atherley's rebound of satisfaction as well as my own at the sound of her voice. It was uncertain and faint at first, but by degrees grew firm again, as timidity was lost in the interest of what she told :

'Last night I sat up with Mrs. Molyneux, holding her hand till she fell asleep, and that was very late, and then I went to the dressing-room, where I was to sleep; and as I undressed, I thought over what Mr. Lyndsay had told us about the ghost; and the more I thought, the more sad and strange it seemed that not one of those who saw it, not even Aunt Eleanour, who is so kind and thoughtful, had had one pitying thought for it. And we who heard about it were just the same, for it seemed to us quite natural and even right that everybody should shrink away from it because it was so horrible; though that should only make them the more kind; just as we feel we must be more tender and loving to any one who

is deformed, and the more shocking his deformity the more tender and loving. And what, I thought, if this poor spirit had come by any chance to ask for something; if it were in pain and longed for relief, or sinful and longed for forgiveness? How dreadful then that other beings should turn from it, instead of going to meet it and comfort it—so dreadful that I almost wished that I might see it, and have the strength to speak to it! And it came into my head that this might happen, for often and often when I have been very anxious to serve some one, the wish has been granted in a quite wonderful way. So when I said my prayers, I asked especially that if it should appear to me, I might have strength to forget all selfish fear and try only to know what it wanted. And as I prayed the foolish shrinking dread we have of such things seemed to fade away; just as when I have prayed for those towards whom I felt cold or unforgiving, the hardness has all melted away into love towards them. And after that came to me

that lovely feeling which we all have sometimes—in church, or when we are praying alone, or more often in the open air, on beautiful summer days when it is warm and still; as if one's heart were beating and overflowing with love towards everything in this world and in all the worlds; as if the very grasses and the stones were dear, but dearest of all, the creatures that still suffer, so that to wipe away their tears forever, one feels that one would die—oh, die so gladly! And always as if this were something not our own, but part of that wonderful great Love above us, about us, everywhere, clasping us all so tenderly and safely!'

Here her voice trembled and failed; she waited a little and then went on, 'Ah, I am too stupid to say rightly what I mean, but you who are clever will understand.

'It was so sweet that I knelt on, drinking it in for a long time; not praying, you know, but just resting, and feeling as if I were in heaven, till all at once, I cannot explain why, I moved and looked round. It was there at

the other end of the room. It was . . .— much worse than I had dreaded it would be; as if it looked out of some great horror deeper than I could understand. The loving feeling was gone, and I was afraid—so much afraid, I only wanted to get out of sight of it. And I think I would have gone, but it stretched out its hands to me as if it were asking for something, and then, of course, I could not go. So, though I was trembling a little, I went nearer and looked into its face. And after that, I was not afraid any more, I was too sorry for it; its poor poor eyes were so full of anguish. I cried: "Oh, why do you look at me like that? Tell me what I shall do."

'And directly I spoke I heard it moan. Oh, George, oh, Mr. Lyndsay, how can I tell you what that moaning was like! Do you know how a little change in the face of some one you love, or a little tremble in his voice, can make you see quite clearly what nobody, not even the great poets, had been able to show you before?

'George, do you remember the day that grandmother died, when they all broke down and cried a little at dinner, all except Uncle Marmaduke? He sat up looking so white and stern at the end of the table. And I, foolish little child, thought he was not so grieved as the others—that he did not love his mother so much. But next day, quite by chance, I heard him, all alone, sobbing over her coffin. I remember standing outside the door and listening, and each sob went through my heart with a little stab, and I knew for the first time what sorrow was. But even his sobs were not so pitiful as the moans of that poor spirit. While I listened I learnt that in another world there may be worse for us to bear than even here—sorrow more hopeless, more lonely. For the strange thing was, the moaning seemed to come from so far far away; not only from somewhere millions and millions away, but—this is the strangest of all—as if it came to me from time long since past, ages and ages ago. I know this sounds

like nonsense, but indeed I am trying to put into words the weary long distance that seemed to stretch between us, like one I never should be able to cross. At last it spoke to me in a whisper which I could only just hear; at least it was more like a whisper than anything else I can think of, and it seemed to come like the moaning from far far away. It thanked me so meekly for looking at it and speaking to it. It told me that by sins committed against others when it was on earth it had broken the bond between itself and all other creatures. While it was what we call alive, it did not feel this, for the senses confuse us and hide many things from the good, and so still more from the wicked; but when it died and lost the body by which it seemed to be kept near to other beings, it found itself imprisoned in the most dreadful loneliness—loneliness which no one in this world can even imagine. Even the pain of solitary confinement, so it told me, which drives men mad, is only like a shadow or type

of this loneliness of spirits. Others there might be, but it knew nothing of them—nothing besides this great empty darkness everywhere, except the place it had once lived in, and the people who were moving about it; and even those it could only perceive dimly as if looking through a mist, and always so unutterably away from them all. I am not giving its own words, you know, George, because I cannot remember them. I am not certain it did speak to me; the thoughts seemed to pass in some strange way into my mind; I cannot explain how, for the still far-away voice did not really speak. Sometimes, it told me, the loneliness became agony, and it longed for a word or a sign from some other being, just as Dives longed for the drop of cold water; and at such times it was able to make the living people see it. But that, alas! was useless, for it only alarmed them so much that the bravest and most benevolent rushed away in terror or would not let it come near them. But still it went on showing itself to one after another,

always hoping that some one would take pity on it and speak to it, for it felt that if comfort ever came to it, it must be through a living soul, and it knew of none save those in this world and in this place. And I said: "Why did you not turn for help to God?"

'Then it gave a terrible answer: it said, "What is God?"

'And when I heard these words there came over me a wild kind of pity, such as I used to feel when I saw my little child struggling for breath when he was ill, and I held out my arms to this poor lonely thing, but it shrank back, crying:

'"Speak to me, but do not touch me, brave human creature. I am all death, and if you come too near me the Death in me may kill the life in you."

'But I said: "No Death can kill the life in me, even though it kill my body. Dear fellow-spirit, I cannot tell you what I know; but let me take you in my arms;

rest for an instant on my heart, and perhaps I may make you feel what I feel all around us."

'And as I spoke I threw my arms around the shadowy form and strained it to my breast. And I felt as if I were pressing to me only air, but air colder than any ice, so that my heart seemed to stop beating, and I could hardly breathe. But I still clasped it closer and closer, and as I grew colder it seemed to grow less chill.

'And at last it spoke, and the whisper was not far away, but near. It said:

'"It is enough; now I know what God is!"

'After that I remember nothing more, till I woke up and found myself lying on the floor beside the bed. It was morning, and the spirit was not there; but I have a strong feeling that I have been able to help it, and that it will trouble you no more.

'Surely it is late! I must go at once. I promised to have tea with the children.'

. . . . .

Neither of us spoke; neither of us stirred; when the sound of her light footfall was heard no more, there was complete silence. Below, the mists had gathered so thickly that now they spread across the valley one dead white sea of vapour in which village and woods and stream were all buried—all except the little church spire, that, still unsubmerged, pointed triumphantly to the sky; and what a sky! For that which yesterday had steeped us in cold and darkness, now, piled even to the zenith in mountainous cloud-masses, was dyed, every crest and summit of it, in crimson fire, pouring from a great fount of colour, where the heavens opened to show that wonder-world in the west, whence saints and singers have drawn their loveliest images of the Rest to come.

But perhaps I saw all things irradiated by the light which had risen upon my darkness—the light that never was on land or sea, but shines reflected in the human face.

. . . . .

'George, I am waiting for your interpretation.'

'It is very simple, Lindy,' he said.

But there was a tone in his voice I had heard once—and only once—before, when, through the first terrible hours that followed my accident, he sat patiently beside me in the darkened room, holding my hot hand in his broad cool palm.

'It is very simple. It is the most easily explained of all the accounts. It was a dream from beginning to end. She fell asleep praying, thinking, as she says; what was more natural or inevitable than that she should dream of the ghost? And it all confirms what I say: that visions are composed by the person who sees them. Nothing could be more characteristic of Cissy than the story she has just told us.'

'And let it be a dream,' I said. 'It is of no consequence, for the dreamer remains, breathing and walking on this solid earth. I have touched her hand, I have looked

into her face. Thank God! she is no vision, the woman who could dream this dream! George, how do you explain the miracle of her existence?'

But Atherley was silent.

THE END

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